



The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
a Second Time

4 The Merchant,
Mired in Greed

NERO
KIZUKA



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While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
a Second Time

4



NONORICK

“White Ramble!”

“Over Limit!”

KAITO UKEI





“All to
restore
this story
to its
proper
path...”

That
pure and
virtuous
water
kept on
flowing
and
flowing,
without
end.

THE PRIESTESS
Metelia Laurelia

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NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by SINSORA

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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time, Vol. 4

NERO KIZUKA

TRANSLATION BY JAKE HUMPHREY • COVER ART BY SINSORA

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NIDOME NO YUSHA WA FUKUSYU NO MICHIO WARAI AYUMU Vol. 4

YOKUSHIZUMI NO SHOUNIN

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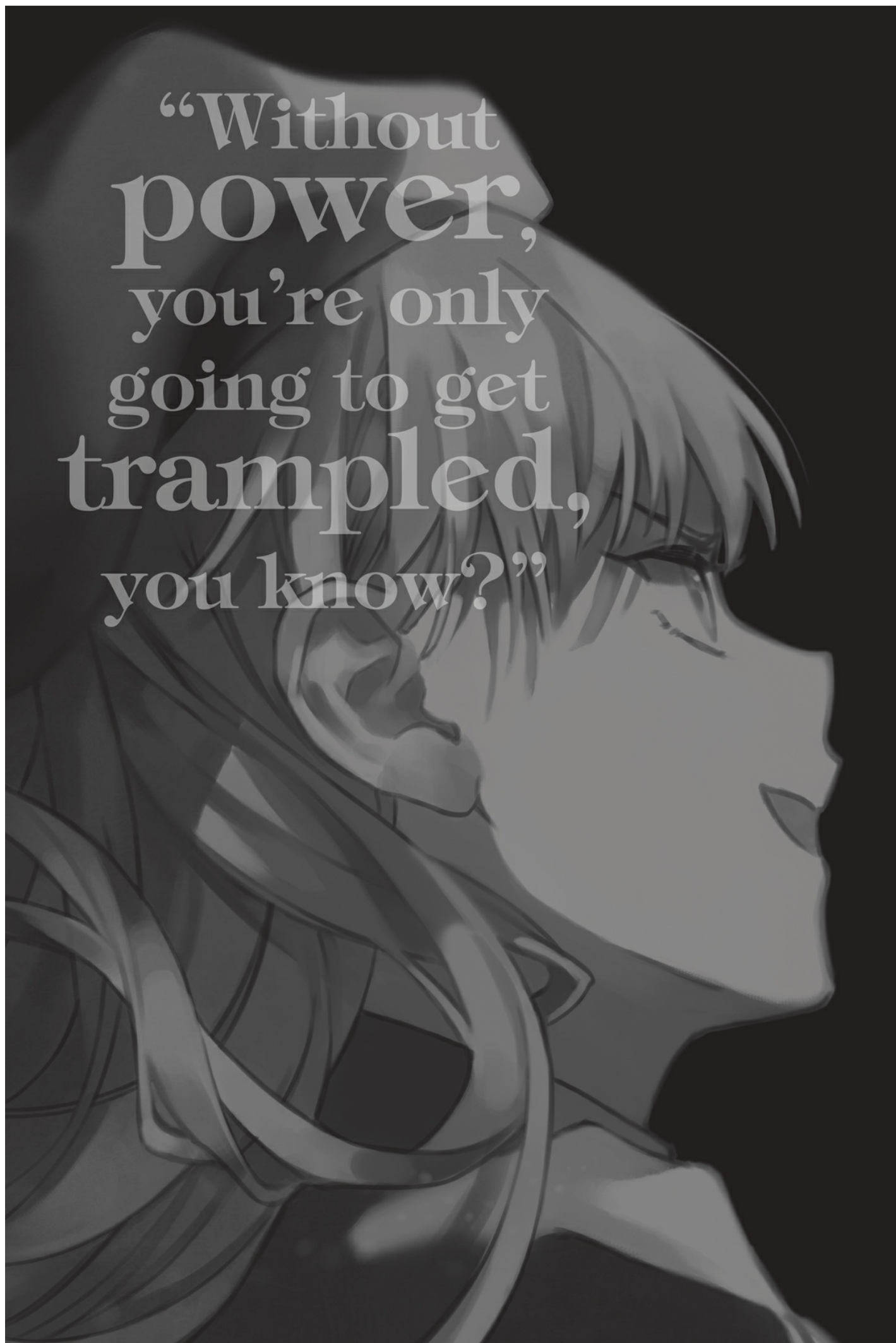
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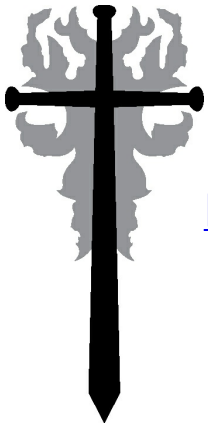
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“Without
power,
you’re only
going to get
trampled,
you know?”





“This time,
I shall
ensure the
proper
ending to
this tale...”



PROLOGUE

I watched as the fingers of flame burned that building, the symbol of my folly, to ash. The wood was soaked with the blood of my foes; over thirty men reduced to corpses with a single swing of my blade. Their lives fueled the crackling flames that crawled over the edifice, its swollen timbers turning red with heat before blackening into charcoal.

“ ... ”

My crimson-stained clothes were damp and weighty. Not a word passed my lips. I simply felt my anger leave me, as though it had never been there to begin with. The only thought left in my mind was the smiling faces of the children, now but a distant memory.

“Mister Hero!” “Mister Kaito!” “Mister Hero!”

My story was not a particularly unusual one. Similar events happened every day, all across the land. Even back home on Earth, there were many countries where tragedy was a daily occurrence. I remembered sitting around the *kotatsu* with my family, watching dispatches from far-flung, war-torn nations while we peeled tangerines and said, “How terrible.”

On the TV, in the papers, and on the internet. Tragedy was everywhere, if only you could be bothered to look. That was more true here in this cutthroat world than ever. Here the most depraved, deranged brutality took place on a daily basis, and sooner or later, tragedy would have struck this place with or without my involvement.

But that fact was cold comfort to me now.

It was taken from me, without even giving me time to curse, all because I hadn't been there to stop it. Faced with my own weakness, all my legendary powers came to nothing, and my smug magnanimity felt like so many rusty daggers in my heart.

There was no point in crying. No sense in tears.

The one I really wanted to kill was away, drowning in riches. All I found here was one he had forsaken. One I had saved him the trouble of disposing of. I understood all too well, and yet I had taken his paltry offering, meager as it was, to fill the gaping void in my heart.

“Khe! Heh-heh-heh! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Oh, how laughable. It really was enough to make me puke.

“They talk of heroes?! Of monsters?!”

I couldn't even save the girl I loved. I'd let her martyr herself for my sake. All that time I'd spent polishing and honing my levels and skills, and revenge still lay outside my grasp.

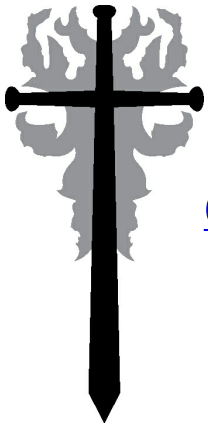
“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

It was too absurd to be true. I had thought the last of my tears long since dried, but they now returned to accompany my frenzied laughter.



It was a memory I could never forget. The day my face was marred with crimson tears. The day my worthless palms were forever stained. Only when I've gutted that pig and rinsed my hands in his entrails will they finally be clean again.

That blood, that sin, will follow me until then. A curse and blessing I wear upon these soiled hands.



CHAPTER 1

The Blood of Sin I Wear

Tch. As I thought, prices are up across the board.”

Whispers that the demons were planning to stage a full-scale assault on humanity had been circulating of late. The fear generated by these tales must have spurred an increase in costs. Still, a price rise of this level was barely noticeable on the balance sheets of my Grond Company, meriting only a cursory glance at most. It was something to keep in the back of my mind, nothing more. The important thing here was trying to work out when the big dip was coming. Now *that* was a business opportunity. A chance to profit while the marketplace floundered in chaos.

“Uncle Gro-ond? I came over just like you asked,” came a sing-song voice, and a young boy walked in through the open door without knocking. He was androgynous in appearance, with a high-pitched voice that made it easy to mistake him for a girl at first glance. Beneath the beret upon his head flowed long, smooth, blond hair that fell to his waist, and his black military garb included a skirt that covered his pale, skinny legs.

“Nonorick. How many times have I asked you to knock and await my invitation before entering?”

“You can’t get angry at every little thing a child does, Uncle. Besides, I told you to call me Nono.”

“A child? Hah. You haven’t aged a day in the five years I’ve known you. Who

knows how old you really are?”

“You just don’t get it at all, Uncle! Nono here is blessed with the eternal heart of an innocent child. What’s on the inside is just as lovable as the outside!”

Nonorick gave a theatrical shrug, then strode over to my desk and seated himself atop it with a hop. Strangely, the desk did not move at all under his weight.

“So what’s the job you’ve got for me today? Another assassination? I prefer torture, myself. Do you mind if I have a little fun with them this time? You don’t, do you?”

Nonorick craned toward me like a little boy asking his mother for candy. An innocent light sparkled in his eyes, the color of tarnished gold.

“I’m afraid it’s neither of those things this time. A simple requisition. Kill whomever you please, but time is of the essence here. Your compensation will fall for every day you’re late.”

“Oh, that’s no fun, Uncle! I took this job because you promised I’d have plenty of toys to play with!” The boy stuck out his lower lip, looking for all the world like a young girl denied a pony for her birthday. His true nature, however, was one of mindless brutality so far gone as to be pure and innocent once more.

“Performing reconnaissance and carrying out my orders—these were the two tasks I stipulated in your contract, were they not? Besides, you’ll get your toys once you finish the job. Haven’t you already had your fill with that ex-adventurer from the orphanage the other day?”

“Mmm... That’s true, buuut...” Like a girl trying to invoke pity, Nonorick placed his finger to his soft lips and gazed at me with upturned eyes. “I really want another fun job. I’ll let you play with me in the bed tonight.”

“I have no interest in men, I’m afraid,” I replied, but in response to my curt refusal, Nonorick only craned his body forward even farther. He traced a slender fingertip across his collarbone as he persisted in that sweet, clear voice of his.

“I can make you change your mind, you know? I’ll let you do anything you want to me. Anything.”

“I told you, I have no interest in men, and I take no pleasure in forcing women to bed when I can purchase whomever I please.”

“Blegh! That’s perverted, Uncle! How am I supposed to appeal to tastes like that?!”

“That’s rich coming from a boy who dresses up as a girl to bed men.”

If nothing else, Nonorick was pleasing to the eye. All his other qualities, however, were completely repugnant.

“Isn’t that what I gave you your toys for anyway?” I asked.

“Eww, no! There’s a difference between people I want to torture and people I want to rail, you know!”

Nonorick’s lustful aura seemed to vanish, and the boy stood up from the desk.

“You will be greatly rewarded if you can complete your assignment within the allotted time frame. Find what I want within two days, and you can have two toys.”

At the mention of pay, Nonorick forgot everything but his own desires, and his face lit up with glee.

“Really? You mean it? Oh, goody! You’re so nice, Uncle! And speaking of toys, the slave you gave me for the last killing has already broken, so you see...”

“...Have they now? Your toys don’t come cheap, you know.”

As far as his abilities were concerned, the boy was a valuable asset. He had keen senses, polished assassination skills, and in spite of his capriciousness, a knack for gathering intelligence that surprised even me. If only I could do something about that sadistic streak of his.



“What I seek is the Leafstone Blade. It was stolen from the orphanage a few days ago and hidden away.”

“Oh, didn’t you just kill the guy who owned it last week? You should have brought the sword back then.”

“I entrusted the job to a subordinate of mine, thinking it would be good to build up his experience a little. Unfortunately, he bit the very hand that fed him and repaid my kindness with treachery.”

“Huh. Oh well. I guess that just means I’ll have to— Huh?!”

“Hmm? What is it? What’s the matter?”

Nonorick tensed up abruptly and cast his gaze out through the window. However, there was nothing there but the darkness of the moonless night.

“I thought I sensed something,” he said. “Maybe I was just imagining it?”

Nonorick hummed and placed a finger to his lip, cocking his head. Then he relaxed once more and gave a shrug.

“Whatever. I’ll be off, then. Be sure to prepare my reward,” he announced, waving over his shoulder without so much as glancing back.

“Of course,” I replied as I watched him leave.



“That was close,” I said. “And here I thought we were far enough away.”

We were sitting in a distant orchard, in the branches of a tall tree, staking out the Grond Company offices. The boy’s keen “Soul-Sense” sent a shiver down my spine. I wanted to go as long as I could without him learning of my existence.

“Oh, sorry about that.”

To get us out of sight as quickly as possible, I had grabbed Minnalis and Shuria by the scruffs of their necks and pulled them close on either side of me. Now I was practically hugging them, so I let go to give them some space.

“It’s okay,” said Minnalis. “In any case, Master, it seems you were correct to take precautions.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “And here I thought I was being too cautious. I certainly didn’t expect to see *that* kid in Grond’s office.”

I frowned. I hadn’t fully been prepared for this. The enchanted spyglass only granted me a visual of what was happening in Grond’s office, not sound, so Nonorick bursting into the room had caught me off guard. Though I couldn’t eavesdrop on their conversation, I could tell from the pair’s body language that their relationship was quite intimate indeed.

“Do you know her, Kaito?”

“Yeah, kind of. I guess they wouldn’t have shown up in your visions, though.”

Nonorick was not a sworn enemy of mine. I had only really crossed paths with him once, on my previous quest to defeat the demon lord. Even so, his distinctive battle style had left a powerful impression on me. I went easy on him because I still believed he was a girl at the time, which had ended in disaster for me. I still remember the shock I felt when he said, “*Erm, don’t you know I’m a boy?*” after our fight.

“I’ll tell you all about it later. Let’s go back to the inn for now. We’ve got no reason to stay out here.”

“Understood, Master.”

“Yes, Kaito!”

We dropped from the tree and disappeared into the crowded city streets.

“We can leave the reconnaissance to Slimo. We’ll proceed with the plan tomorrow.”

“Yes, Master,” said Minnalis. “Things are about to get interesting, aren’t they?”

“Ooh, I just can’t wait!” added Shuria.

Our eyes glittered as we contemplated what was to come, as though gazing upon a sumptuous feast laid out before us.

The next day, we visited a dungeon close to the town of Dartras. It was an unpopular location for adventuring due to its low difficulty, which made it perfect for our needs. Ideally, we would have used a dungeon that wasn’t

discovered yet, but there were none nearby.

“Phew. Feels good to finally be out under the sun again.”

I stretched and inhaled the fresh air outside after exiting the dank passageways of the dungeon. There was to be no more sitting in darkness among its sluglike denizens while we organized information relayed to us via Slimo and Mouse #1.

“I’m just happy I never have to see another one of those slimy bastards ever again.” I sighed.

“I wouldn’t mind the slime if it was *you* rubbing it all over me,” said Shuria. “In fact, I think I’d like it! Tee-hee-hee!”

“Forget the slugs, it was the damp air that really got on my nerves,” said Minnalis. “Doing the laundry was a nightmare...”

...That’s exactly what a maid would say, Minnalis. Have you finally turned into one completely...?

As for Shuria’s comment, well, I didn’t hear it. Yep. I don’t know what you’re talking about.

“In any case, we have all we need now,” I said, peering inside my Squirrel’s Blade of Holding to check that the Dungeon Core we had pilfered hadn’t gone anywhere. People would be furious if they found out we had this, so I’d left a little countermeasure in place. I’d used the power of the Suction Blade to gather up all the pieces of the *other* Dungeon Core we had taken from the Goblin’s Den, the dungeon close to the capital. By mixing these pieces with some quartz from the cave floor and sticking it all together with the soul blade, I had succeeded in creating a fake Core that, while not completely indistinguishable from the genuine article, would fool people long enough for us to finish our task and get out of here.

“This Dungeon Core will let us create a Mana Storm,” I explained. “One strong enough to disrupt any form of enchanted communication.”

A Mana Storm was a natural disaster unique to this world, and one that could strike anywhere, at any time. It caused the mana in the air to become so unstable and difficult to control that even demons struggled to cast anything

more than the most basic spell. On top of that, it agitated any monsters in the vicinity.

We could use the Dungeon Core in my possession to artificially induce one of these Mana Storms ourselves. That was why we had worked so hard to secure one.

To truly screw Grond over, we needed to disrupt his line of communication with the capital. Specifically, with the princess. If he was able to confer with her, our whole plan would come crashing down.

“Now then. Let us proceed to phase two.”



The room was dark and needlessly wide, more of a hole dug from the mud than anything else. A secret dungeon chamber. Or I suppose it was an ex-dungeon now, seeing as how Kaito, Minnalis and I had already removed the Dungeon Core. Right now, the two of them were busy creating a decoy replacement.

“Urgh... Ahh...”

“...It seems the poison is doing its work,” said Minnalis.

“He’s half asleep!” I cried. “This will make it much easier for Teddy to do his job!”

In front of us was a man strapped to a chair I had made by one of my servants, Miss Metal. Thanks to the poison Minnalis had provided, the man was now halfway to the land of Nod. My job was to use Teddy to create a dream for the man that would make it easier for him to answer our questions.

“Come on, Teddy. It’s time to begin,” I said.

I took my familiar out of Kaito’s magic bag and held him in my arms. I usually kept Kitty and Miss Metal in there as well. I would cuddle them whenever I couldn’t sleep at night, but Teddy was a late riser.

“Khii... Khii-hii-hii.”

“You mustn’t oversleep, Teddy,” I warned him. “Not when you have a job to do. You’ll get punished for that.”

"I'm tired. Five more minutes," he responded. Really, Teddy? What a lazy boy.

"Khii-hii?!"

I increased the amount of mana I was channeling into him, sending the plushie into a panic. It was very cute.

"You'll get your lazy bones in gear if you know what's good for you. Come on."

"Khii-hii..."

As I reduced my mana transfer to normal levels again, he stroked his chest as if heaving a sigh of relief. Then I placed Teddy on the ground, and he began waddling over to the seated man.

"Kii-kii!"

"Khii-hii!"

Miss Metal raised a metallic feeler as if in greeting, to which Teddy returned a wave.

"Now then, it is time to begin... To the confines of fleeting dreams. *Puppet Possession: Teddy.*"

As I said the magic words, Teddy turned dim and blurry before dissolving into a black mist, which floated over to Miss Metal and coiled around the man.

"Ugh... Ahh..."

I began forming a scene in my mind, giving shape to the mist. It was the image of that fat pig, seared into my memories. A man who would not hesitate to steal what did not belong to him if it meant feeding his insatiable desires. A worthless piece of trash almost as detestable as my sister: Grond.

Once the image was fixed in my mind, I let Teddy handle the rest. Meanwhile, I took a wooden desk and piece of paper from Kaito's bag. Typically, Minnalis and I would use these to write down our ideas in preparation for the day when we would finally get physical with Kaito, but today I was to record any information we could extract from the man we had captured. Minnalis could read and write basic sentences, but I had been writing letters to my family for a very long time. I also had other notebooks that Kaito and Minnalis didn't know

about, ones where I noted down my deepest desires. As a result, I was very good at writing.

“I’m ready, Minnalis!”

“Good,” she replied. “Let’s get started, then,” she said, turning to the man, “We’ll try this again. Answer each of my questions one by one. What is your name?”

“...Ad...rea,” said the man.

“How old are you?”

“...Thirty...four...”

“Where do you work?”

“At the offices...of the Grond Company...”

The man’s answers were slow and stilted at first, but soon they grew clear and coherent. As they did, Minnalis increased the specificity of her questions.

“What exactly do you do at your job?”

“I handle records... and reports...for the company’s dealings...”

“And what exactly do you keep track of in these records?”

“Names of business partners...names and quantities of sold goods...names and quantities of received goods...”

Minnalis cast me a glance. I made sure I was ready to start jotting down notes and nodded back.

“Okay then...,” she went on.



“I’m baaack!”

My task finished, I returned to the hidden chamber, where I was greeted by the voices of Minnalis and Shuria.

“Welcome back, Master!”

“Welcome back, Kaito!”

I had just made a trip to the highway leading back to Dartras in search of a traveling merchant who could deliver *a little letter* for me. It had taken a while, but eventually I'd found one heading in the right direction, already bearing a sack of letters. Then I'd used the remainder of my time to go into town myself and meet up with Slimo. He had been doing another task for me, and he was doing so well that I wanted to reward him with several rare potions. My slimy friend took to potions like dogs did to treats, and he was always eager to sample new kinds. I figured it was okay spoiling him now, since he'd soon be put to work again after Minnalis finished interrogating that guy. His "Long-Distance" and "Capacity Up" skills really came in handy for gathering things, too.

"Ah, it looks like I got back just in time," I said, seeing the Grond Company accountant unconscious in his chair. It seemed the interrogation had reached a nice stopping point.

"Kupie! Kupie!"

"Kii-kii! Kii-kii-kii!"

"You two really are good friends, aren't you?"

Perhaps because they were both amorphous blobs, Slimo and Miss Metal got on really well. They slithered over to each other and gave what appeared to be a high five with their feelers.

"I believe we have extracted all the useful information we can, Master."

"It went perfectly!" Shuria added, showing me the pages of notes she had taken, which listed row after row of company names.

"As rotten as they are, you've got to give 'em credit," I said. "The Grond Company really has been busy, hasn't it?"

This list would make it far easier to exact my revenge with precision and efficiency, and my lips curled at the thought. As much as it pained me to drag honest, upstanding companies into this, I would not hesitate for the sake of my vengeance. Slimo had a lot more work ahead of him.

"All right, then. We'll take this list and have Slimo sow the seeds. Then we'll come along to water them. We can also switch it up depending on how things go. First we need to start the Mana Storm, and..."

Just then, my belly rumbled, a long, hollow echo.

“...And before that we need to eat, of course. Let’s head back to the inn for now.”

“Well said, Master. I am rather peckish myself,” said Minnalis, looking down at the man on the ground. “The poison is about to wear off, too, and people will notice his absence before long.”

“Oh, oh! I want to go to a food stall!” cheered Shuria.

“Good idea,” I said. “I could go for an orc-meat skewer or a Hunting Cow stew right now...”

“Absolutely not!” protested Minnalis. “No way will I let you have such an unhealthy meal right on the eve of our revenge!”

Minnalis was adamant in her refusal. I could almost see a big fat “No!” floating in the air behind her.

““Why nooot?”” Shuria and I moaned.

“Don’t give me that. That stuff is not only bad for you, but expensive as well. Why do you both want to eat it so much?”

Minnalis frowned, as though wanting to indulge in something comforting was beyond belief. She was making the same face my sister made when I would order fast food back home. She’d always launch into a tirade on the evils of empty calories before finishing off with, “*You aren’t planning on dying early and leaving me all alone, are you?*” That, plus the teary eyes that accompanied her statement, were usually enough to put me off eating out for a month or so. However, my abstinence would never last long, so Mai’s lectures were a semi-regular occurrence.

“Well...don’t you think there’s something alluring about the food carts?” I asked.

“We know they are tacky, but that tackiness is what draws us to them!” added Shuria.

In fact, if you went by the taste, Minnalis’s cooking was a million times better. If I could pick only one thing to eat for the rest of my life, it’d be her food

without a second thought. But sometimes you wanted to eat something different for a change. Humans could be strange like that.

“...Haah. Very well,” she relented. “I’m sure you two will just sneak out there if I say no anyway.”

““Uh.””

We averted our eyes at Minnalis’s pointed glare.

“I’d rather see what you’re eating than have it happen behind my back.”

““Yippee!””

We jumped for joy and set out to find a food cart before Minnalis changed her mind. Picking up the unconscious man, we dragged him out of the secret room and toward the dungeon entrance. It was rare for Minnalis to allow us to snack at a food cart. We knew we’d better stuff our faces, because we didn’t know when we’d next have this chance.

“Hmm. I had better figure out how to make this food for myself. First, I shall sample the taste...”

I heard Minnalis muttering something to herself behind us.

...One day, they might not even *want* to eat out anymore...



The next day, we trekked up a mountain range a short distance from Dartras. The Audross Mountains were sparse in terms of both cliffs and trees, so they were relatively easy to climb. It was more like we were hiking than climbing, and the sky was sunny and bright. The pleasant atmosphere reminded me of a day far in the past, when the orphanage kids and I had embarked upon a picnic.

“Hey, Mister Hero! Come train with me! I need to get strong like you, so I can protect the other kids!”

“Take this, Mister Hero! Kelly can’t protect us, but you can! Just like you did Toria!”

“Sh-Shenfa?!”

“C’mon, Shenfa. Boys have pride, you know. Be a little more considerate...”

"Mister Kaito! I made this for you to eat! Give it a taste!"

"Let's see... Ngh! Hrk?! T-Toria...did you taste test this?"

"Huh? That would mean there'd be less for you, Mister Kaito."

"R-right. Maybe you should next time. I appreciate the thought, though. Have a headpat."

"Mmyah?! I'm not a kid! Stop treating me like one!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The memories came to me like sunlight filtering through trees, but their softness brought only pain to my wounded heart. Just then, a pair of voices roused me from my reverie.

"Is something the matter, Master?"

"You appear to not be paying attention."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, it's nothing."

"Master, there's no need to be stubborn. You can tell us."

"Do you not trust us, Kaito?"

I almost reflexively tried to deny it, but seeing their powerful glares, I quickly raised the white flag.

"...You're right, I'm sorry. I was just remembering some stuff."

We were here to ensure that everything was okay with the location where I intended to perform the final act of my revenge on Grond. It was a place birthed of my failure the last time around, the spot where that school had once stood, mired in evil. On that day, I had watched it burn to the ground as the world's harsh realities fueled my laughter. Now, however, there was nothing there but lush vegetation covering the earth.

"It's too late for reminiscence now, though."

That's right. It was far too late. The emotions I'd felt back then were unshakable. They'd dyed my very bones. The regret, the anger, the pain, the despair. The girl, whose hand had slipped from my grasp. My hands, stained with blood but powerless to help. And that day, that one, single day, where I

couldn't hear her crying out for help.

"Though, I guess it's not quite reminiscence, is it? After all, it's far from over."

They weren't confined to the past. I could still feel all those emotions just as clearly at this moment, as if I were right there.

"In that case," said Minnalis, in a slightly strict tone, "We must act swiftly while we still can. While they know nothing. While they remember nothing. The scars of the first world are gone in this one, as though none of it ever happened."

Minnalis grinned a charming grin that contained all her hate and rage.

"But it did happen. And we mustn't let this world forget that. We will make them learn, whatever it takes. We will carve the memories into their souls if we have to."

"That is why we became your partners in crime, Kaito," continued Shuria in a cheery voice. "To kill them all! To torture them and torture them so that they know nothing but pain!"

"...You're right. Let's keep it together, then. We've still got a long day ahead of us!"

I was grateful to my partners for keeping me on the crooked and narrow. I had to keep my eyes on the prize.

Halfway up the Audross Mountains, which was quite a long distance from town, we at last arrived at a sunny area sparsely populated with trees.

"..."

For an instant, I saw a wooden schoolhouse erected in the clearing, before my mind flashed back to reality.

"All right, looking good," I said. The only thing here now was a deep hole about fifteen meters in diameter.

"Squeak! Squeak!"

Suddenly, a mouse appeared at my feet. It was Sir Squeaks, formerly known as Mouse #1. Shuria had forced me to change his name when I'd been using

him to spy on Grond last night. *“Mouse #1? You can’t call him that! He deserves something much cuter!”*

I had thought it rather slick myself, but acquiesced to Shuria. The sight of Sir Squeaks enjoying his new name left me very depressed. I asked Slimo about it afterward, to which he replied, *“He likes the name.”* I kept the fact that his response made me want to cry to myself.

The newly christened Sir Squeaks came with fresh abilities to match. He had acquired a new skill, “Command (Rodents),” which enabled him to give orders to other mice and rats. He’d been employing this skill to dig a hole for my final act.

Minnalis and I had done the hard work of digging the hole used against Eumis ourselves. And what a load of work it had been. Don’t forget that pit had needed to be deep enough to fit a golem.

Sir Squeaks had completed the order I’d given him through his Control Brand, and the hole was finished.

“Yep, this looks deep enough.”

I crouched at the edge and peered inside. It looked about three meters deep.

“Squeak!”

Sir Squeaks looked up at me as if begging for attention and clambered onto my shoulder to nuzzle against me.

Incidentally, it seemed Sir Squeaks was something of a clean freak, so he groomed himself meticulously. Whenever he came upon a stream, he would wash himself in it without fail, and he also liked to be given pieces of soap. All this was to say that he was exceedingly clean for a mouse, and his fur was silky and smooth. Very cute.

“Good boy, good boy. Well done.”

“Squeak!”

I stroked the mouse on the head in thanks, and he let out a cry of appreciation.

““ ... ””

“Yes, yes. I know, you two. You don’t have to stare at me like that.”

Leticia had always called me oblivious, but that was simply not true. I, too, was familiar with the ways of the womenfolk, as it were. Girls liked small animals, and the envy on my partners’ faces as I stroked my cute pet was too clear to ignore. I wasn’t so insensitive that I couldn’t put two and two together.

“Here you go. You can stroke him as much as you like. Just don’t upset him.”

“Master...”

“Sigh... Kaito...”

“Squeak.”

“...Huh? Was I off the mark?”

All I got from the eyes of my three compatriots was that I’d just said something completely incorrect.



“Whoops. Aagh, look at this mess...”

The cracker in my hand split in half and crumbled onto my lap. *Damn*. As soon as I let my mind wander, I’d started thinking about Grond again. While this proclivity of mine was great for making sure I stayed focused on my vengeance, at times like these it made it very difficult to rein in my emotions. I brought the teacup in my hand to my lips in an effort to calm myself down.

“Ahh. That’s good.”

Our plans were proceeding smoothly, and we were currently taking a break, relaxing at the inn with some tea.

“There’s no tea like roasted green tea,” I said. In fact, I’d bought a merchant’s entire stock of the stuff. Minnalis had brewed this batch and made some deep-fried fish bone *senbei* to go with it. Ideally, I would have preferred some properly baked *senbei*, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

Senbei and tea. The lifeblood of a Japanese person. While these weren’t quite identical to the kinds back home, they still brought relief to my homesick soul.

“...What an intriguing flavor,” said Minnalis. “The color is not too different

from black tea, yet it's nicely fragrant without being overly bitter. I've never had it before, but it's quite delicious. So this is the food of your homeland, Master."

"The stuff they have at the capital is more like black tea or coffee," I shrugged. "I'm glad we were able to get some of this."

I looked out of the window and swept my gaze across the town of Dartras. This city was an international trade hub. People from all sorts of businesses, large and small, competed for control of the marketplace, and large quantities of money and goods swapped hands here every day.

Copper, silver, gold, even platinum coins. All were a common sight in this town.

"It's not the worst cup I've had," said Shuria, "but I still prefer it with lots and lots of milk!"

"Ah, then you might prefer something called matcha," I told her. "I wasn't able to find any in this town, but a matcha latte is nice and sweet. When we visit the empire, I'll take you to a place that makes it."

"Yay! I'll look forward to that!"

"Um, Master...what about me?"

"Don't look so sad, Minnalis. You can come, too."

"*Hnh*! Thank you very much, Master!"

The two of them looked overjoyed. It seemed sweets could win the hearts of women everywhere.

As I watched them, I went over the facts in my head. I had used every means at my disposal to learn all I could about our enemy, Grond. Things I hadn't known about him the first time.

On the surface, he was a skilled and prosperous merchant, but beneath that polished facade lay another side, a crook who pursued his aims by any means necessary. I learned he had recently shipped a large number of beastfolk slaves to the capital—sacrifices for my summoning, most likely. It also seemed that he used Nonorick as a lackey of some kind for his more sinister operation. I had even learned that it was Grond, or rather, one of his associates, who had killed

the husband of the orphanage's matron to steal his magic sword.

"Argh, I did it again."

Another *senbei* fell to pieces in my hand.

"You're like a child, Master," said Minnalis.

"Such a messy eater," added Shuria. "You mustn't waste food, you know."

"Sorry."

I think they both knew what was going through my mind. The way they'd said that told me they were teasing me.

"But you two have crumbs all over your faces, too."

""What?!""

"Just kidding."

"Ah, Master!"

"That's mean!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, you two are so easy to trick!"

I grinned at their faces, red with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation, before bringing my tea to my lips once more.

I couldn't be more grateful to have my partners in crime at my side. We kept each other sane and stopped the anger from consuming us completely.

I looked out the window once more. There stood the old orphanage. A young woman was playing with some children in its garden. Before long, the sun would set, and they would all be sleeping soundly in their beds.

The first time around, the matron must have suspected that Grond was responsible for her husband's death. She would have realized that he and I had been cooperating when we left town together. Back then, she had hesitated for a moment before grinning at me. But what had really been on her mind?

...I don't even need to ask, do I?

I hadn't been aware of this at the time, but I was now. The Holy Sword of Retribution showed me the slight, yet undeniable thirst for revenge dwelling in

the woman's heart.

"Ahh, I knew it was a mistake to stay at this inn."

When she learned that I'd *killed the children*, she wailed and beat my chest. Then she'd asked me why.

"...I'll never be able to sleep around that place, no matter how comfortable the beds are."

I closed my eyes, but the scene was burned into my mind, as clear and vivid now as it had ever been.



"W-wait! It's me! It's me, Kaito! Kelly, Shenfa! Wake up!"

"Kill...the hero... I want...Lemonade... I want it... I want it!"

"Diiiiie, Hero! Diiiiie!"

"I want Lemonade so bad... Lemonade... Lemonade!"

"Grh! It's like they don't know it's me!"

How many times had we played together? Now the orphanage kids were coming at me with daggers, lashing out recklessly as though their very lives depended on stabbing me through the heart.

"Dammit!"

In a flash, I disarmed the lot of them. Stripped of their weapons, they stood around with blank looks on their faces, as if unsure how they should proceed. Luckily, I had managed to do it without harming any of them, but I wasn't out of the woods yet.

"Haah...haah... What's going on?!"

Just as I started thinking they were acting strangely...

"Waaah—ghuh!"

"Help! Miss Myun, he—gblhh!"

"Aaaah! Aaaaahhh! Aaaa—gruh!"

"What's happening?"

...the children suddenly began screaming in agony. Then they all vomited torrents of blood and collapsed to the floor before I could do a thing.

“Huh...? Mister...Hero...”

“Toria!”

A girl looked up at me at the very last moment, the light just returning to her eyes. She stretched out her little arms and...

“It hurts... Mister Hero, it hurts... Please... Hel—”

Before I could hold her hand, before she could even finish her sentence, Toria vomited a stream of blood and collapsed.

“Toria! Toria!”

The crimson liquid spilled from her lips onto the ground. It was all over my hands, warm and sticky.

“Goddammit...”

My voice quavered. I was no stranger to death by this point, and I had even taken many lives myself. That was why I knew it was too late. The children were all gone.

“GODDAMMIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!”

I screamed so hard I thought my throat would tear.

“Eek!”

My howling wail shook the air, and I felt something react close by. It was the person who had brought these children here and had watched as they suffered. I would not let him escape. I dashed over to the man with such force that the very floor buckled beneath me.

“...And where do you think you’re going?”

“Eek! No, no, no!”

I grabbed the man by his collar and held him fast as he tried to flee.

“Wh-what’s the matter? I’m just passing by— Gyaaaagh?!”

“Stick to answering my questions. What happened here?”

I ground his hand into the ground. I had never used pain to extract information before, but now wasn't the time for hesitation.

"Owowow! It huuurts!"

"Wait. I remember you. You work for Grond, don't you? Did he put you up to this? ...Stop squealing and answer me, you piece of shit!"

My mind seethed, and my vision went red with anger.

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything!"

The panicked man began to talk.

"They were orphans—child soldiers, the first students of a school for assassins! The boss took them in and offered them food and shelter. In exchange, we taught them the art of killing."

"A school?"

"Y-yeah. It was something he'd been planning to do for a while, but about two years ago he finally got the money to build it."

"Two...years...ago...?"

A sinister chill ran down my spine. That was around the time when the magic item we'd developed based on my knowledge of Earth had gone on sale.

"We will need enough gold to finance a campaign against the demon lord if we are ever to take her down. The money brought in by your invention will be spent on training soldiers and, per your request, supporting the lives of children whose parents were slain in the war."

I suddenly recalled what Grond had said with a friendly, benevolent smile plastered on his face. It all fit together too well to be coincidence. The blood in my veins turned to ice.

"H-hey...you're not going to kill me, are you? I was just following orders..."

The voice coming from the bonehead on the ground before me no longer felt real.

...Oh, what on Earth is this guy babbling about?

"Tell me where that school is."

Those were all the words my tired throat managed to squeeze out.

“H-halfway up the Audross Mountains. Look, you win. You’ll never see me again, promise. And I’ll quit working for Grond, too. I’ll even skip town, so just don’t—”

“Don’t what? Kill you?”

“Huh?”

This guy was really making no sense at all.

“Give me one good reason I should let you live.”

Those assholes had used children like their pawns. Like their slaves.

“You fed them *Lemonade*, didn’t you? That’s why they were so strong and quick-witted for their level, and why their minds were so broken they could only cry out for more. Your Hyperanabolic Acid destroyed them.”

A substance called Hyperanabolic Acid was often used to dispose of cursed items, thanks to its ability to break down any kind of metal into inert clay. When taken as a drug, however, it induced rapid growth in a person’s stats. That being said, it was dangerously addictive and fatal in high enough doses.

“W-well... Gh! Gugragh!”

“Why should I let you live after that?”

“Ggh...gah...gegau...”

“Give me a break, you piece of trash!”

Slowly, the man’s neck bones snapped in my hands as I choked him to death. I dropped his lifeless body to the ground and stared at my blood-soaked palms.

“...Come, infernal scarlet. *Blue Wheel of the Red Sun*.”

I brandished my soul blade as if moved by my irrepressible grief to ensure that not even his corpse would remain. Howling, bruise-colored flames burned his flesh and bones away until there was nothing left. As if there had never been anything there to begin with.

“...It happened again.”

My voice was stark against the dead forest air. My despair and frustration sucked all the strength from me, and I fell to the ground.

“It’s all my fault...again.”

I slumped against a tree trunk. The throbbing pain in my head was too much to bear.

He said Grond had *finally got the money to do it*.

This never would have happened if I hadn’t placed so much trust in him.

If only I had doubted him; those children would still be alive at this very moment, cheerful and smiling.

“Why did I have to make this mistake...?”

Grond had indeed reached out to children who had lost their parents with the money I’d given him. He’d built them a school to create an army of his very own pawns.

He had killed those kids...and so had my own shortsightedness.

“...Damn...”

My cheeks were stained with tears of regret.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!”

As my grief flowed out of me, I beat my fists against the ground.

“GODDAMMIIIIIIIIT!!”

The earth flattened beneath my fists, but no matter how hard I beat the ground, the blood would not come off. It clung to my flesh like goosebumps. And the only thing I could hear, no matter how hard I tried to forget, were those four little letters—“*Help*”—that Toria hadn’t even managed to say.

Several days later.

I visited the school Grond’s employee had told me about. For the first time since realizing I had been betrayed, I went looking for a fight on my own terms.

I killed them all. I let the anger cut them down. I slashed and I slashed and I slashed, until the walls, floors, and ceiling were all stained in blood, as was I.

In one of the rooms, I found a note detailing the whole plan, as if somebody had left it there for me to find.

I read the note, as blood from my hands soaked into the paper. It clearly stated that the money I'd given Grond, along with the cooperation of a group of thugs from the slums called the Slugs, had enabled them to put the plan into motion.

...Then I came across a heading that read "Method for Disposing of Failures."

That day, a new misdeed was added to my rapidly growing list of crimes. "The bloodthirsty hero attacked an orphanage established by the Grond Company and slaughtered all the children and workers there."



"Gh...haah...haah...haah...ng..... Haah."

I sat up in a panic, clutching my hair as if I could pluck the memories from my brain and never have to see them again. My pajamas clung to the sweat on my skin, cold and discomforting.

"..."

A glance at the window told me it was not yet dawn. In fact, the darkness of the city outside indicated that the sunrise was a long way off yet.

Minnalis and Shuria were still fast asleep. I couldn't go straight back to bed, but I didn't want to wake them, either, so I softly left the room. I went outside, where the cool night air caressed my cheeks.

Then I leaped off the walls of the alley behind the inn, making my way up and onto the rooftop. I sat myself down on the shingles of the roof and watched the night sky.

The last time I'd seen Grond Gordott had been before the princess had revealed the truth of the summoning ritual to me. Back then, I was still desperately trying to make it back to the capital so I could return to my world and keep my promise to Leticia.

I had spent many late nights with Grond developing our inventions for market. Bags under our eyes, we'd shared a laugh when our hard work finally

bore fruit. But at that point, he'd already betrayed me—I just hadn't realized it. The weapons and magic items he had supplied me with were cursed, and they lowered my stats so it was easy for him to ensnare me.

"Your knowledge has brought me great riches, but I'm afraid nobody else can have that information but me. Everything in this world has a value, and yours is less than that of a single copper piece."

That was what Grond told me when I asked him why he did it, right before I made my escape.

But that wasn't the end of people trying to kill me. I ran into many more before I even reached the capital. Status, honor, anger, frustration. And money. Everyone had their own reasons for wanting me dead.

But I was the second demon lord. The hero who'd betrayed the world and stood on the side of evil. Each and every world leader had turned on me, and they were intent on using me as a scapegoat to cover up their own crimes. My counterpart, Leticia, was said to be holed up in her sanctum, surrounded by demons. I, on the other hand, always traveled alone, which made me a relatively easy target. For these reasons and many others, I found I had no shortage of foes, even though I was strong enough that people would normally think twice about picking a fight with me. It was laughable how thoroughly my shit-eating party had strung me up. I vowed to make sure that each and every one of them paid dearly for their deception.

So I never had any kind of showdown with Grond. I learned the secret of the summoning ritual when I reached the capital. After that, I was so utterly broken that nothing seemed to matter anymore. I had no goal, only a promise I couldn't keep. So I just kept running, running, running...

Assassins came after me like ants to a piece of dropped candy, and I chased them off without ever stopping to ask myself what it was all for. However, one of those attacks I still remember very clearly. It was from a group of boys and girls, all around ten years old, with clouded, lifeless eyes whom *I recognized at once*. They were the orphan children I had played with in Dartras. Ordinary kids, or so I'd believed. They came at me with polished skills learned out of nowhere; skills not for fighting, but for *killing*. The rest went exactly like in my dream.

Those children had been cut off from their parents, just like me, so I'd wanted to help them. But Grond had used that money to brainwash them into child soldiers.

I had wanted to protect them. I thought I *could* protect them.

What an idiotic thought. The only thing I'd given them was a poison that rotted their minds.

I had mistakenly placed my trust in Grond, and for that, I was rewarded with nothing but suffering. Yet it was so obvious that he was planning on screwing me over that I shouldn't have been surprised in the first place.

"The moon sure is full tonight."

I stretched out my arm toward it. Reach just a little farther, and it seemed I might be able to pluck it from the sky. But, of course, I couldn't. Of course I couldn't.

Still, that didn't mean it wasn't there. It wasn't gone just because I couldn't touch it.

Even if everyone else had forgotten. As long as I alone still remembered.

The memories of that day were still fresh in my mind.

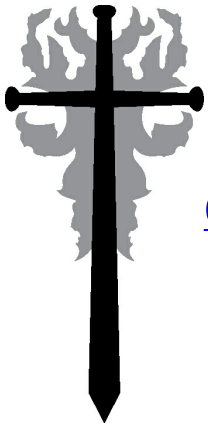
"I'm finally going to take revenge for you all," I said aloud. "I might have messed things up the first time around, but this time, they're going down. Maybe that's not what you want, but it's like you said: grown-ups are unfair."

I smiled as I said this, looking down at my palm.

"..."

The events of that day had not disappeared. They were still right here. Even if the world had been reset. Even if all traces of it were gone. It could never be undone.

...Because the blood of sin still stained my hands, as fresh and moist as the day it all began.



CHAPTER 2

Four Little Letters

With our stage prepared, the next day we proceeded to the next step of our scheme. The hour was late, and the streets were bathed in scarlet light, like flaming blood. Heartened by that auspicious omen, we headed into town and made our way to a street lined with luxury inns, an area dedicated to rich nobles and diplomats from foreign nations.

“Why is it that aristocrats enjoy all this ostentatious rubbish?” muttered Minnalis upon seeing our destination. The facades of the buildings here were decorated with glittering metals, and it was clear that money had been spent in pursuit of form over function.

“Ooh, it’s too bright to even look at!” grumbled Shuria, squinting. To be honest, I felt the same way.

“Just try to ignore it,” I said. “Come on, we’re nearly there.”

We had come here in search of the border where this district touched the slums. There we would find an entrance into a world of lowlifes and villains.

“Let’s go. This is our first step to settling the debt for those four little letters.”

As I walked, I felt the blood quicken in my veins.

“...Not a single one of them will escape. I’ll crush them all to death. Slowly.”

Soon it grew difficult to tell where the hotel district ended and the slums began. It was there, deep underground, that we came across our destination.

Here, the Slugs owned and operated a venue of sorts, which took the form of a sunken arena enclosed by one-story spectator seating. In the center of the room, suspended high above the ring, was a television monitor.

The audience members wore lavish suits and dresses, looking rich by any measure. They had all donned masks to conceal their identities, and they were gazing keenly at the spectacle unfolding in the ring below.

That was all strange enough. Yet more bizarre still was the atmosphere choking the arena.

“Bear witness, one and all! Tonight, another evening of riches and marvels unfolds! Let me hear your voices, your cheers and boos. Let’s see the money rolling!”

“““RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!””””

The air was almost aflame with passion. It slithered like a serpent between the seats, enveloping the room in its intensity. Even children could *feel* something was wrong here, though they might not know quite what.

“Roaaaaaar!”

“Hrk!”

“Oooohhh! A decisive blow from the wolf-mask in the blue corner! The bear-mask in the red corner is staggering!”

“Stay in the game, wolf-mask! I’ve got a lot of money riding on you; don’t you dare disappoint me!”

“Oh, how magnificent. Now, snap your foe’s arm off while he reels!”

The crowd looked on with crazed eyes and foaming mouths as the two men, their faces sullen and with only ragged cloths tied around their loins, fought in the center below. It was an illegal fighting pit, with guest seating that could hold up to a hundred spectators with ease.

Betting arenas like these weren’t exactly uncommon. The empire was host to huge fighting pits called “Coliseums” that operated legally. Unlike those venues, however, here a fight was fought to its bitter end. No surrender, no reprieve. The battle kept going until one of the combatants lay dead.

“Hurgh...hurgh... Graaaaaaargh!”

“S...stop... Gaaaaaaagh!”

“And the bear-mask is down! The wolfman goes for the eyes!”

The more cruelly a fighter finished off their opponent, the more handsome their reward.

“Grh! Aaaagh! Stop! Grhhhh!”

“What brutality! Now he’s sticking his fingers in the bear-mask’s empty sockets!”

“Hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee! Think of all the Lemonade I’ll get for this! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The men duking it out in the arena were not there of their own accord, but they weren’t slaves who’d been raised for combat, either. Rather, they were all people the Slugs had gotten hooked on Lemonade.

“Lemonaaade! Lemonade!”

“Stop...please stop...bro...ther...”

And finally, to heighten the spectacle, the Slugs pitted kin against kin.

We watched the scene unfold with cold eyes from the edge of the room.

“Christ, what a horrid sight,” I muttered. It was humanity distilled right down to its vilest essence.

“What they are doing is not so different from what we do, though,” noted Minnalis.

“I resent the implication,” I replied. “Those guys gave up their sanity of their own accord.”

I gave a sigh of lament, but I was sure that to an outside observer, our actions would come across as no different from what was happening here. That our ignoble pursuits would paint such a nasty picture should have come as no surprise, and it wasn’t like I had any particular objections, but...

“Haah... What a rotten world we live in,” I said, sighing.

“It is all right,” Shuria reassured me. “We make sure to select our foes wisely. We do not just go picking on people who have nothing to do with our vengeance.”

“Besides,” added Minnalis, “didn’t you decide to avoid unnecessary killings precisely to avoid falling to their level?”

They were right. We had chosen to walk the fine line of gray, the razor-thin edge separating right and wrong, so we might achieve our vengeance without losing our humanity.

“I see. So we should learn from their mistakes, huh? Makes sense.”

An avenger and a mass murderer were two sides of the same coin. Had we crossed that line that we ourselves had drawn? Had we become monsters without even realizing it? Had our crusade become nothing more than an outlet for our fury?

“...”

Glancing around, I saw only people who had given in to the darkness that lurked in the hearts of all humankind. It was our duty to ensure we didn’t come across the same way, except to those whom we had decreed must suffer.

“All right, change of plan. We’re not here to take out the trash—we’re here for revenge. Ignore the guests.”

The people here were all scum, of course, and a part of me longed to strike them down because of it. But there was no room for that sort of motive in our vengeance. We were here to get our own back, not to change the world. I’d leave punishing evil to the superheroes.

We would need to use all of our strength to defeat the Slugs. Otherwise, it wouldn’t make a good funeral.

“Hmm, I think they’re just as bad if you ask me,” Shuria remarked. “I don’t think it would be so bad to slaughter the pigs in the stands as well.”

“I feel that way, too,” Minnalis agreed, “but if Master says so, then that is the way it must be. He always chooses the strangest hills to die on.”

“...”

“Hmm. You do always pick the strangest hills to die on, Kaito. You shall go bald if you keep it up.”

“Why do you always choose to fret about things that don’t matter, brother dearest?”

I recalled the sentiments that Leticia and Mai would repeat to me with worrying regularity. Was I taking it too seriously? No, I was the only one taking it seriously enough. I’d know I had gone too far when I *didn’t* have these feelings of doubt and guilt. That’s when I could be sure my emotions had shattered me without ever having let me get close to achieving my revenge.

“...Right, then. Let’s get started. Ignore the guests and focus on the Slugs. Make terror run through their very bones. Then kill them once they’re soaked in it.”

“Understood, Master.”

“Aye-aye, Kaito!”

Just then, there came another voice.

“Excuse me, sir. Could I have a moment?”

It was one of the beefy security guards protecting this place. His courteous tone did little to nullify his brutish aura. He was a thug through and through, a dealer in blood and violence, and his hastily learned etiquette made for a thin veneer over the animal beneath.

I suppose that’s all the courtesy he needs in a place like this... At least it makes it easy for us to sort the wheat from the chaff.

“Heh... If that’s the way it is, then I guess we’re chaff, too.”

That was why this guy had called out to us in the first place.

“Perfect timing. It’s time to get the ball rolling.”

“You’re not customers! Who are you?!”

“Let the bloodshed begin. I’m going to enjoy this.”

Just as the thug seemed to recognize my unsettling aura, I picked him up and threw him with all my strength—plus a healthy dosage of mana—and slammed

him into the monitor hanging above the ring.

“Wh-what is that?!”

“Huh?! What’s going on?!”

The man flew like a laser beam and shattered the magical monitor as he crashed into it. The splash I heard served as a grisly reminder that the human body was mostly water. Shards of glass and moist chunks of meat rained down from above.

“EEEEEEEEK!”

“Keep calm! Everybody, keep calm!”

“Outta my way! I’m gettin’ the hell outta here!”

Seeing that something was plainly wrong, the spectators started jostling for the exit.

“All so quick to recognize danger. I guess that’s why they’re still here,” I said.

We watched the room empty of spectators from our vantage point opposite the exit. The roughneck thugs stationed around the arena struggled against the tide of people.

“Why don’t we fight down in the ring?” suggested Minnalis.

“It does give us a lot more space,” said Shuria. “And it would make for some delicious irony.”

“Yeah, good idea,” I said, and the three of us descended into the center of the arena. The ground down there was cold and hard, and the air chilly and dry. “This is starting to feel like a movie,” I commented.

“Listen up, punks!” came the distinctive voice of the man who had been riling up the crowd earlier. “You’ve gone and spoiled the show. Do you know what happens to troublemakers like you? Huh?!” he growled, lending his voice a far more threatening air than it had previously held.

“Well, this is a surprise,” said Shuria. “They have a lot more vim and vigor than I imagined. Like cockroaches.”

“What a perfect image,” Minnalis agreed. “I couldn’t have put it better

myself.”

Obviously, we were not about to let ourselves be swayed by their intimidation, but it seemed like our insults had wounded the thug’s pride quite a fair bit, for the man had gone rosy-cheeked with anger.

“You won’t be so calm when we’re through with you! Don’t you see you’re outnumbered?! You think you’re hot shit just because you trod on one of our ants?!”

“You know,” I said, “you guys are awfully thin-skinned considering all the insults you throw out.”

“What did you just say?!”

“See? There you go again. You’re going to burst a blood vessel at this rate. Or maybe you’ve already blown them all and that’s why you can’t think for yourself? What is the world coming to when guys are still breathing?”

“Y-you...little punk!”

I’d never seen someone so easy to rile up. If that ruddy face and those bloodshot eyes of his were an act, then they were an exceedingly good one.

“On the other hand, you couldn’t recognize your hand in front of your face,” I said.

“What?”

“You think we’re *calm*? Us? I don’t know how dumb you have to be to reach that conclusion.”

Kill them! the voices in our heads screamed. At Minnalis, Shuria, and me. We heard them every moment of every day, like jagged stones bursting forth to break out of our skin. We were held together by a fraying thread that threatened to give way even now.

However...

“I don’t care about the fat cats in the stands. Scum though they are, they’ve got nothing to do with why we’re here today. However...”

...that thread no longer mattered.

"You guys are gonna pay. With your lives."

It could snap right now, and none of it would matter.

"I don't care if you were just the goons. I don't care if you were just following orders. This is the opening act, and it's gonna be a doozy."

"Huh?!"

These guys were a stepping-stone to the stepping-stone that led to Grond. But more than that, I simply wanted to kill them.

...That sentiment was what lent my next words their insatiable malice.

"...I'm gonna tear you all to pieces."

"Ugh? Hruh?! Grh! Grhblh!"

I stuck my fingers into the man's eye sockets, squashing his eyeballs and thrusting his head down and into the ground. There came a sound like a wrecking ball crashing into its target, and then the whole room fell silent.

"I really do love this world sometimes," I said, slowly rising up to full height once more. The corners of my lips curled up into a grin. "People here are so tough to put down. It means I can really take my time."

"Graaaaaaaaagh?!"

I swung my leg down hard, crushing the man's arm with a wet crunch. A jet of blood stained my cheek.

At last, I no longer needed to hold back. I slowly raised my gaze, meeting the sight of those cowering imbeciles, and my smile widened even more.



The air was choked with nothing but the stench of trickling blood. Every last one of the men who'd drugged my brother and me and forced us to fight were dead.

And yet all I could think about was my hometown. A memory from so long ago, it no longer felt real. Yet in that memory...I was smiling.

"Look at this, brother! Doesn't this leek look like a sword?"

"It's okay, brother. I'll protect us. You won't need to worry anymore."

"Let's go, brother! We'll become B-rank, no, A-rank adventurers, and bring wealth to our village!"

...Oh, how did things end up this way?

How did I end up here?

Why did my brother lay dead before my eyes?

And why were my hands stained in his blood?

I kneeled there, as if in the very pits of hell itself. Mutilated bodies surrounded me. Among them, my brother's corpse appeared to be the lucky one, because it was at least possible to tell that he had once been human.

"...Ha-ha... That's not right. That's not right at all."

Why did I have to regain my sanity now, of all times? Was it the drug? Had it finally worn off? It couldn't have picked a worse time. Why had it taken longer than my brother's dose to fade? If it had only left me quicker, perhaps it would be me laying there now instead of him.

And if that hadn't been in the cards, then I would much rather stay mad forever. I'd sooner drown in insanity than face a reality as cruel as this!

"..."

Then I noticed the master of this hell standing before me. He looked down at me, his face filled with a gentle light. I found it difficult now to imagine him the conductor of the disastrous spectacle I had just witnessed.

"Please, kill me. Make me beyond salvation, for I am sure there is none for me now."

I could live in this world no longer. I could bear it no longer.

"Don't you want to get revenge?"

"...How could I? I am sure this will be my last moment of lucidity before the madness takes hold of me again. Besides, I'm as good as dead already. Isn't that right?"

"Grh."

Despite my words of resignation, there was still a part of me that wished to be informed it was not so. Perhaps detecting this, the man frowned.

“Ha-ha. What a face you make, sire.”

This monster, who had shown no remorse as he slaughtered men in the dozens earlier, now seemed to hesitate for the first time. So he was human after all.

“If I am to die regardless, I would much rather it be at your hand than wait until the drug snatches away the last of my humanity.”

“...I see.”

The man closed his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them, I saw a dark, dark flame residing in them.

“Then rest easy,” he said. “I’ll slaughter the lot of them.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Very well. Then I’ll await them in hell.”

For some reason, I laughed. Something I had not done in a very long time. Longer than I could remember now.

The man’s hand glowed, and in it appeared a straight sword of simple make. He lifted it above his head, and I saw in his eyes once more that dark, dark light.

“Oh, why did it come to this?”

My last words left my lips as my vision cut to black.



“What a sorry sight.”

I dispelled the Soul Blade of Beginnings and stared at the man’s bisected remains. The remains of a man ruined by Lemonade.

“I can’t imagine returning to sanity just moments away from death.”

From the moment I laid eyes on the two wretches in the ring, I knew they were too far gone to be saved. Besides, that was not my mission here, and turning anyone and everyone I came across into my accomplice was not sustainable.

More than anything else, though, it was what the man had sought in his final moments that had steered my hand. Not revenge, but salvation. That wasn't good enough. I couldn't bring anyone on my journey unless they had the same lust for vengeance that I did. Someone who swore reprisal, even with their dying breath. A hatred so pure that even the encroaching futility of oblivion could not temper it.

In those terms, that man's vengeance was lacking.

"Well, we're about to get his payback for him anyway."

The grudges we bore were weighty enough. What was one man's more for the pile?

"...Ha-ha."

Just then, my lips crept up and I let out a chuckle.

"Kha-ha! A-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, things are really starting to heat up! Let's get a move on, you two! I want to get to killing so bad I can't wait a second longer!"

"Yes, Master!"

"Coming, Kaito!"

On to the next location. Throw another bundle of kindling onto the black flame. We had only just lifted the lid on the pits of hell where we would boil the Slugs alive.

"Who the hell are— Gah!"

"Out of my way."

Later that day, I found myself in the slums, the place where the burgeoning masses of humanity went to die. A man had just rushed me, and I sent him flying with a backhand strike. He was the last of them, though exactly how many there had been I couldn't quite remember. They weren't dead, not yet anyway; they were made of sturdy stuff, and there was still a chance they'd pull through. A chance was better than what my real targets would get. These guys were nothing to me, just a bunch of thugs who'd accosted me on the road, looking to take their toll. I didn't care whether they lived or died.

And so I continued on my merry way, a little pep in my step as I proceeded

along our route.

“It seems you are in a good mood, Master,” noted Minnalis.

“I can almost see the little music notes floating around you!” Shuria added.

“I’m just a little hungry, is all. That entrée was only enough to whet my appetite. There’s still a lot of them to go before I’m full up.”

My heart quickened with excitement, every beat urging me onward.

I wouldn’t say I was happy. Excited? Closer, but still not quite right. It was like I had dropped something precious to me, and I was making my way to the lost and found to retrieve it.

Just then, we arrived at our destination: a concrete-esque building, a crude but well-built hideout. This was the one and only stronghold of the leader of the Slugs, and a gathering place for the scum who dealt Lemonade, the drug synthesized from Hyperanabolic Acid.

“What’re you freaks— Gruh!”

“Heh-heh! Well look at you, cutie! I’m gonna— Grgaaah!”

“Don’t touch me,” muttered Minnalis.

“How annoying,” added Shuria.

The bodyguards at the door gormlessly wandered over, but my accomplices made short work of them. Minnalis, with a spinning kick that went right through the first one’s gut and into his spine, and Shuria, with a flick of her wrist that sent out magical puppet strings to twist the second one’s head and break his neck.

“Here we are,” I said. “Time to begin act two.”

As if expelling all my pent-up emotion, I blasted the door off its hinges with a kick.

“Wh-who the hell are you?!”

“Where are the guards?!”

“What’s going on?!”

I couldn't help but smile as I watched those squealing insects squirm. Grond wasn't my only enemy; these guys were also on my shit list. And they would suffer for it. I'd make sure of it. I'd teach them pain and despair the likes of which they'd never felt, and from which they knew they could never hope to escape.

"..."

I thought of the children's smiles. I thought of their tragic deaths.

Then I clasped my hand around the broken shard that was all that remained of them.

"...I'm gonna make you pay for those four little letters. All of hell's gonna hear you scream."



"Gyaaaaaaagh?! My eyes! My eeeyes! My arm, where's my aaaaarm?!"

"Gwaaagh?! My skin! It's meeeltingggg!"

"S-stop! Don't do this, Jenice! Gyaaaagh!"

"No! Nooo! It's not me, Slove! My armor, it's moving on its own! I can't control it! Grrrrrgh! Gh...gh."

You could find shadowy streets like these ones in any town, and these were the scum who proudly called them home. Their screams were music to my ears.

"Owowowow! It hurts! Guhhh...aghhhh!"

"Tee-hee. Beastfolk really are tough. The poison takes so long to take effect that you lose all sense long before you die. It's a little bit of a shame. Let's try this one next. There's a lot more toxins to go!"

Minnalis fiddled gleefully with her poisons, a big smile on her face, as the man before her screamed out mindlessly in pain.

"Gah! Gh... Ughhhh!"

"Stop it! Why is no one fighting back?! Someone, please, kill meeee!"

"Whoops, I was trying to make you cut off his arm, but I missed again. This wouldn't happen if you didn't struggle so much, you know."

Out of Shuria's tanned, slender fingers shot several magical threads latched onto the gang woman's surprisingly high-quality armor. As the dark elf girl groped the air, the woman obeyed, cutting down her comrades with her blade, yet *strangely avoiding their vital organs*. Meanwhile, her victims seemed held in place by some mysterious power, unable to dodge or do anything except scream.

"Stop it! Don't touch them!"

"Kha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, that's good. I can really feel the terror in your voice. Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

The screams coming from the man beneath my foot, the boss of this place, were music to my ears. His muscular body was lined with cuts and bruises, and his eyepatch-covered visage looked far less intimidating now that he was on the floor.

"Listen, you little punk! Get your foot off me right now, or else..."

"Or else what? Don't you want to see what happens? After all, you're always putting on shows for those freaks in the hotel district. *'Drug addicts fight to the death in this blood-filled spectacular!'* I bet you didn't mind watching those, did you? Hell of a sport, if you ask me."

"W-well..."

This man was a member of the criminal underworld. They killed, stole, raped, and pillaged. Made their livings by feeding on the misfortune of others, by bleeding innocent people dry. And this was their biggest score. The drug they called Lemonade, a tiny little light blue pill filled with Hyperanabolic Acid.

"So this should be fun, shouldn't it? Come on, laugh and clap your hands like you always do. My girls are up to the task, you know. They'll put on a show like you've never seen before."



“Tee-hee-hee-hee! Now then. What shall we rot next? You may be missing both ears and an eye, but you still have another eye left, along with your nose, your lips, and your teeth! Tee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Aww, you killed another one. I wanted him to suffer longer! Longer!”

I could tell those two really hated these scumbags. They had raised their levels, so their MP cap had increased to the point where they no longer felt MP drunkenness from exercising their powers. Still, they seemed to be so excited that they were losing their senses regardless. Not that I was any better myself.

“Stop! Stop! Stop, stop, stop, stopppppp!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Who would put an end to such an excellent show? Why do you think we went to all the trouble of keeping you alive?”

The air was filled with low groans, high-pitched wails, and the rusty scent of blood.

“Minnalis, I’m all out. Won’t you share some of your food with me?” Shuria asked.

“Sorry, Shuria, but you’re not the only one who wants to break their necks!” Minnalis replied.

“Grrr, Minnalis, you big meanie!”

“Hey, come on now, no fighting,” I said.

The two women seemed to be getting on well. Very good, very good. Time to proceed with the show and give this guy a little bit of pain to go out with. He was watching the scene play out before him, a look of utter grief plastered on his face.

“Y-you! You think you can get aw—? Aaaaaaagh!”

“You bozos all say the same thing. *You think you can get away with this?* Don’t you understand? It’s because you got away with it a long time ago that you’re even in this situation now.”

I pressed down on the man’s legs, shattering both of his kneecaps as I monologued.

“Gah! Grhh...”

“Does it hurt? Hmm? There’s this nice phrase where I come from: *Pain is your body’s way of telling you you’re still alive*. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Graaaaaaagh?!?!”

I moved on from the man’s knee and proceeded to break his calf bones in three separate places.

“It means, you’ve still got plenty of time to scream! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You rotten punk! You fucked-up little freak!”

Sweat dribbled down the man’s face, but still the gang leader showed no signs of surrender.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, you don’t have to tell me that. I’ve been fucked-up for a *long* time.”

“Gragh! Stop! Aaaaghahgh!”

“That’s right, let me hear your screams! Let me hear you pay back your debt! You’re nowhere near finished yet! Those kids were doing their best just to make it through each day! I can’t face them yet! I can’t let myself!”

All I had been able to do the first time around was burn that hidden school to the ground. I’d never staged an assault on town. Grond had fortified its defenses and imposed martial law in preparation for the demon lord’s invasion, and I had helped him do it. I knew victory was beyond me, so I gave up before even trying.

“I did nothing, don’t you understand? I did nothing!”

Grond and the rest of these scumbags had lived to see another day, and I did nothing to stop it. Not only had I failed to protect the ones I cared about, but I couldn’t even avenge them.

“I’m just a worthless piece of shit who couldn’t even save those kids. For all my power, I couldn’t be there when they needed me most... But I still can’t see why they had to die! Why did you have to rope them into it?!”

They were just like me, children torn from their families. They'd just lacked the strength to survive in this world by themselves. Even so, the orphanage matron had reached out to them, helped them get back on their feet, and so they supported each other in return.

"So why the hell did they have to become food for assholes like you?!"

I clenched my fists so hard my nails drew blood.

"It was just four little letters!"

Those children were stronger than I had ever been. Their smiles brought light to the darkness of this world day in and day out.

"Why was she not even allowed to ask for *help*?"

Each and every one of them had died writhing in agony, unable to even form the words.

"What did their lives mean to you?! Answer me, you maggot!"

"I dunno! Wh-what are you even talking about? Who *are* you?! Are you related to that deadbeat we killed the other day?!"

"...Oh, of course. You don't know, do you? And even if you did, you wouldn't have an answer. So let's hear your screams, then! Suffer, suffer, suffer! There's not an ounce of mercy waiting for you where we're going!"

The soul blade in my hand was the Fang of the Close Shave. I had recently unlocked it and had tested it out by peeling the skins off some unfortunate live bandits. Its gray blade had no edge; instead, it appeared to be made out of some sort of unhardened rubber. Halfway along its length was a mouth about a centimeter across, filled with countless gnashing teeth. This blade was not for killing. Its only purpose was excruciating torture.

"Eeek! Wh-what the hell, man?! I'm sorry, look, I'm sorry!"

"I'm afraid your punishment is only just beginning. *Starving Maw of Horrors*. Chew him up and spit him out."

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The Fang of the Close Shave ground its teeth happily, then turned pale and

lost its shape, becoming a transparent fluid. It swelled up and engulfed the man's arm. The dozens of little teeth swimming inside clamped around his limb and began to gnash at it.

"Doesn't that hurt? I bet it does. How does it feel having your skin bitten off? Come on, say it. Tell me how it feels!"

"Aaaargh! It huuurts! It feels like I'm gonna diie! Please stop, pleeeeeease!"

"Did you stop when they were screaming? I don't think so. Too little, too late, I'm afraid."

"Gggaaaaghh!"

"You didn't even let them say those four little letters! You never even gave me a chance to hear that single word!"

The teeth slowly nibbled away at the man's limbs. His left arm, right arm, then down to his right leg, left leg. Finally, the Fang of the Close Shave consumed his entire body from the neck down, flaying away the skin and the top layer of the flesh beneath, until all that remained was something that could only really be said to have the *shape* of a human.

Yet even now, the man was alive and conscious. Each time he tried to pass out, another sharp pain drew him awake.

"Ah...gh...grh..."

And whenever his own torture grew too overwhelming, he had Minnalis's and Shuria's little show to watch to take his mind off it. Not a speck of light remained in the man's eyes now, only pain and despair. They were the same eyes those children had possessed, right up until the very end. This was what I wanted to see. In the end, the only wails that filled the air were those coming from this man.

"There's so much more I want to do, but it looks like we're out of time," I said. "I just hope that if there is an afterlife in this world, you end up suffering there for all eternity."

I switched to the Soul Blade of Beginnings and raised it high above my head. Perhaps sensing his imminent death, a tiny sparkle of light returned to the

man's weary eyes.

"Gh...gah... H...hel—ghhhh...gh...ah..."

However, his final words died as I plunged my blade through his skull.

"You think I'm gonna let you say that? Those four little letters? Not on your life."

I denied the man his cry for help, just as Toria had been denied hers.

Three days later, we finally finished channeling mana into the Dungeon Core and headed to the forest on the outskirts of town. There, we created a Mana Storm that engulfed the town of Dartras and cut off all forms of magical communication. I couldn't help but smile at the howls of the rushing winds. They were like the jubilant roars of a terrifying behemoth.

"Blow, winds, blow. All that they have will become mulch beneath my feet."

Now then, Grond. Allow me to make a little market prediction of my own.

"I will take your life with my own hands. Mark my words."



"Oh, I'm getting wet just thinking about it."

Before Nonorick lay the corpse of a man who looked as if he had been attacked with a blacksmith's rasp. Based on the dryness of the blood and the state of the desecrated bodies, he could tell a substantial amount of time had passed since whatever had occurred here. The boy took great pleasure in imagining just what that might have been.

"Grr, how did they do this? What tool did they use? I want one!"

He poked at a corpse, pressing his fingertip into the wet, sinewy flesh.

"It was two...no, three people," he said, looking around once more. "One who made all these stab wounds, one who uses poisons, and whoever was responsible for this..."

Nonorick deduced what he could about the orchestrators of this massacre from the state of the cadavers.

"Tee-hee-hee. What kind of people were they, I wonder? I hope they can

teach me how they did it... Aww, if only I didn't have work, I'd go track them down right away."

Although he had no leads, it wasn't exactly uncommon for louts such as these to end up pissing off the wrong people and paying a gruesome price for it. Still, Nonorick was certain he could track down the men responsible. His nose was like that of a wild beast.

"Maybe Uncle will tell me to go after them if I ask him nicely. Oh, just when can I meet them?"

The look on his face was that of a young maiden dreaming of her Prince Charming.

"All righty! Time to psyche myself up and get some work done! Let's get to it!"

He turned on his heel, his long blond hair streaming out from under his beret, and disappeared into the night. The sight of what appeared to be a pretty young girl walking through the slums ought to have been strange, but stranger still by far was the smell of death that clung to him.



"What did you say?! Are you positive?!" I bellowed. I couldn't believe what Nonorick was telling me. I was so surprised my pen tore a hole right through the contract I was signing.

"Eek! There's no need to get rough, Uncle. You can't please a woman with vigor alone."

"This isn't the time for jokes! Is what you just said true?!"

Nonorick laid on the custom-made sofa in my office, wrapping his arms around his torso coquettishly.

"Really, Uncle, you're so impatient. You need to learn to slow down and enjoy the ride, or else the girl's going to get bored."

"I don't care. I'm asking you if the group I left in charge of Lemonade distribution are really all dead."

"Yeah, pretty much," Nonorick replied. "I saw it with my own eyes. Some of

them had been poisoned, while others seemed to have turned their swords on each other for some weird reason. Oh, I took some pictures with my image crystal! Want to have a look?”

Nonorick took out a blue crystal and projected an image onto the office wall without even waiting for my reply.

...What brutal work. Notorious as those men were, there are few brave enough to stage an attack like this.

The image showed countless corpses. Bodies with each and every joint bent backward like macabre statues. Bodies still clasping their swords, embedded in their comrades’ stomachs. Bodies that were now little more than humanoid figures, their flesh melted and purple. And finally, the body of a man whose skin had been peeled off to expose the dark muscle beneath. A large hole ran through his head and out the other side. The few identifiable faces of the cadavers were twisted into masks of terror and despair, marred with tearstains that showed they had been crying right up until their final moments.

“And just look at this leader guy in front! He was killed in a *very* interesting way, don’t you think? ♪ It’s hard to tell from the image crystal, but look right here, it’s like his skin was torn away by itty-bitty knives. This is the first time I’ve been utterly stumped as to how they did it! My pants are getting wet!”

“...What does this mean?”

I held my throbbing head in my hand and looked skyward as I leaned on my chair for support.

The corpse that so enthralled young Nonorick. That’s the leader of the Slugs.

The man looked almost like another person now, what with his visage warped in fear, but what was left of his face said it all. He was the man who I’d left in charge of Lemonade production and distribution.

“Rrrgh... Dammit! Now I have to start all over again!”

The distribution wasn’t the problem—it was finding a trustworthy group to handle production. We knew that Hyperanabolic Acid was the secret ingredient, so there was always the option of manufacturing it ourselves, but that would make it very hard to deny our involvement if the truth came to light. Criminal

enterprise was profitable, but the risk was so much greater than above-the-board business if you didn't take steps to cover your ass. The complete eradication of the Slugs came as grave news indeed.

And the records, destroyed? Perhaps...

"Ah, Uncle! You're growing suspicious of me again!"

"Ngh!"

Nonorick slapped me in the face with a wet tea cloth as soon as doubt entered my mind.

"It's true, I never liked that drug," he said, "but I would never do anything to impede your business! Boo-hoo-hoo!"

"...Fine, I get it. I apologize."

It's like he can read my mind...

I knew Nonorick despised narcotics, so for a moment, I suspected he had destroyed all the records relating to the drug's production. Yet he'd guessed where my mind was going before I could even finish my thought.

"Whatever. I'll see you again soon, Uncle. ♪"

Waving good-bye, Nonorick disappeared through my office door. A short while later, there came a knock.

"Come in."

"Excuse me, sir."

The doorknob clicked. And into the room stepped Fegner.

"If I may, sir. I have received some information that may interest you."

"What is it?"

"It is still only a rumor, but...it appears that the crown is considering recasting its currency."

"What?!"

I stood up from my chair with a start. If this was true, it was big news. Nations recast their currency by melting down all the coins in circulation to alter their

metal content. The kingdom and the empire, for example, both used gold coins, but their purities—and thus, their values—were different.

If the kingdom reduced the purity of its currency, then its buying power would be reduced abroad, even though its face value would still be maintained within its borders.

“Are you sure about this?! Where did you hear this?!”

“From a relative of mine who works at the Ministry of Finance in the capital, sir. I received a letter from him just before agitated monsters blocked off the roads into town. He took pains to encipher this information and pen it in invisible ink, a method we had agreed upon for matters of utmost secrecy. I believe that goes to show the sincerity of his words.”

“I see...”

My astonishment lasted but only a moment before my mind began to whirl into action once more. If this was true, then we had to act fast. The kingdom had carried out a recast once before when the realm had faced financial troubles, siphoning the gold and silver out of the currency and into its own coffers.

It certainly wouldn't be unusual to order a recast with the economy the way it is...

For reasons I could not fathom, the crown had been rather loose with its purse strings of late. They had ordered a grand total of two hundred beastfolk slaves from my company, not to mention a plethora of expensive magic items.

Of course, more business for me was never unwelcome, but even a nation was capable of running its coffers dry.

“Grr, there are so many things to worry about lately.”

I scratched my head in frustration and sipped some tea. It was a new variety from the capital I hadn't tried before, but I found its distinctive green color and refined taste rather pleasing. A sip or two always seemed to help settle the nerves.

“Now...”

After my tea break, I mulled the matter over some more. Quite frankly, I would have preferred the capital not go ahead with the recast, as reissuing currency would make all coins currently in circulation unusable. There would be a period of time where they could be exchanged for new currency with the government, but once that grace period expired, they would become contraband, essentially black-market currency. The old coins would have the higher value of metal content, after all.

One option, therefore, was to stockpile the more valuable pieces for a rainy day. However, this was far more trouble than it was worth for merchants like me, who required liquid assets to make their gains. In the long run, it was more profitable to simply comply with the government, even if that meant a slight reduction in the value of my assets.

“Hmm, so it will be the subsidy that determines whether this little upset results in a profit or a loss,” I said. “...Either way, I ought to think about liquidation.”

It wasn't as though the kingdom was completely deaf to the plight of merchants and nobles who stood to lose wealth as a result of the recast. For those whom the inflation hit hardest, there was compensation available by way of a subsidy.

Of course, it would not do to let this information go unconfirmed, but having more cash on hand as a preliminary measure was never a bad thing.

“...Tsk, and to think I could easily corroborate this rumor if this Mana Storm wasn't here.”

My company maintained friendly trading relations with Princess Alicia. We took care of some of her clandestine operations, and in exchange she was very liberal with information at times like these. But the Mana Storm had rendered all forms of magical communication ineffective, so I had no means of getting in touch with the princess. My magical transmitter was far too large to be carried outside of the range of the storm, and that was setting aside the fact that we could only install it in locations that took full advantage of the magical flow of the land.

Furthermore, even if we did get a caravan together and moved the

transmitter to one of these locations, our actions would undoubtedly draw attention. The eyes of our competitors were everywhere in this town, and I couldn't afford them even the slightest advantage.

"...All right then, Fegner. Go around the other companies and sell off all our stock that doesn't already have a buyer. If you have to twist their arms a little, then so be it. Tell them...hmm. Tell them we're raising money to build a new office in the empire."

"Very well, sir. As you wish."

I took a single sheet of writing paper from my desk and began penning a letter to the princess, asking her to confirm the rumors surrounding the recast. Then I placed my message into an envelope, sealed it with wax, and stamped it with the Grond Company crest, a horse and hammer.

"Hey, anyone there?" I called out. An underling answered my summons.

"You called, sir?"

"Send this letter to our office in the capital. Use a teleportation stone. And hurry."

It would normally be unthinkable to use an expensive teleportation stone for the sake of a single letter, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Teleportation stones could ignore the effects of the Mana Storm when they were being sent out. Even one of low rarity would suffice to transport such a small payload. However, the princess would not be able to send her response *into* the Mana Storm the same way.

"Yes, sir."

I handed the letter over to the man, who bowed and left the room.

"I suppose I won't receive a response for a week, at least."

"Precisely, sir."

Fegner responded as though my rough calculation were the word of Lunaris. His sudden report had caught me by surprise initially, but the more I thought it over, the more I came to see it as cause for celebration. Though I didn't have enough money on hand at present to qualify for the subsidy, I had time to

change that, thanks to receiving advance notice of the recast. My competitors had information networks of their own, but with the Mana Storm currently plaguing the town and monsters blocking the paths out of the city, they would have no means of finding out about the recast, magical or otherwise.

“Who else could be in the know about this?” I asked Fegner.

“It is quite unlikely anyone else is aware, sir. The merchant had no other letters to deliver when he brought mine to me.”

That clinched it. My company would be the only business in town to receive the subsidy. I didn’t yet know what magnitude of recompense the crown would be offering, but it was sure to be no small sum.

“With Lemonade bringing in a steady stream of revenue, we cannot fail. Soon, my company will swallow every last one of our competitors in Dartras. Then all will be powerless to stop me from increasing my fortunes further, from the industry fat cats we’ve been forced to kowtow to, to those daft old codgers from the Merchants Guild! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

I cackled as though I could feel the gold coins gushing from the ground like geysers around me.

...Without noticing the single mouse that was listening to my every word.



“Nice. Grond is reacting exactly as I hoped he would.”

I severed my mental link with Sir Squeaks and muttered to myself in the silence of the empty inn room. Everything was going according to plan. The trash was on track to ruin. I raised my hand to my face, as if attempting to hold back the emotion that flooded out of me unimpeded.

“That’s right. That’s it, Grond. Follow your greed. Heh-heh-heh...”

Get fatter, and fatter, and fatter. Eat up the feed I’ve sprinkled into your trough and swell up like a balloon. Then I’ll scrape the fat off you, make you thin, brittle and ready to pop.

Then at last, I’ll claw you open.

“Keep on chasing that filthy little golden dream of yours. I’ll make you lose

your mind to avarice, just like you destroyed the minds of those children. Hah-hah-hah... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Unable to control my wild shrieks of delight, I threw myself onto the bed.



It must have been back when I was about ten years old.

I had been invited to spend the long summer vacation in the countryside with a family friend of ours. I had a lot of fun playing in the stream, catching bugs, and going to festivals, but in the end, my host put me to work planting vegetables like carrots and cabbages in exchange for the room and board.

What’s the point of this story, you ask? Well...

“When it comes to planting seeds, too many cooks spoil the broth.”

I muttered these words of wisdom to myself with a sense of escapism. A few days had passed since we’d inspected the stage of our final act, and we’d since taken to sneaking into stores; this was our tenth so far. Shops which stuck to a single product, like weapons or magical items, tended not to see that much commerce, so they didn’t need to keep a lot of money on hand. That meant they could put much greater effort into hiding their proceeds. Consequently, it took a while to find where they hid their spoils, even with Minnalis and Shuria helping me look. This was where Slimo came in handy.

My familiar was capable of squeezing his gelatinous body through the tiniest of cracks, and he could split himself up to search all corners of the space at once.

In contrast to individually owned small *stores*, *companies* held on to goods purchased from elsewhere to sell at their own venues, as well as materials to pass on wholesale to smaller workshops. When, exactly, a store became a company was a bit of a gray area, but one criterion was when it began facilitating the transfer of materials between businesses. And a company who sold not to customers, but to whole stores, saw a lot more money changing hands than any individual shop did.

Furthermore, stores needed to hold their money in copper and silver coins so they could do business with anyone who walked through the door, which

meant any large amount of money quickly became unwieldy.

This world lacked the intricate minting machinery of modern-day Japan, so individual coins were relatively thick. A thousand of them were almost impossible to transport. You needed a lot of space to store your earnings, so every company possessed a strongbox in which to keep them, along with metals or magic items that were small but valuable. Some places even dedicated an entire room to vault space, which only made it even easier to get in and out without leaving a trace.

And so there I was, stuffing my bag with gold coins in the musty old basement of some two-bit business. I was counting them carefully in accordance with the list that Minnalis and Shuria had extracted from Grond's associate.

"A hundred and forty-fiiiive, a hundred and forty-siiix, a hundred and forty-seven! There, that should be it. Now for the two hundred and sixty-two large coppers and three hundred standard coppers."

The reason I was taking such care over the number was because we only wanted to steal a precise amount. If we were off by even a single coin, our plan wouldn't be nearly as effective. It was hard work, but I couldn't let up here. I thought about the contribution each and every coin was making to Grond's despair.

The seed I had planted was spreading its roots, breaking apart the depths of the earth and coiling around his legs. He would be too distracted by the golden fruit dangling before him to notice the flowers blooming at his feet. Too entranced to feel the poison sapping away his life.

"And that's the last of them. *Euphon Company*," I said, stowing away all the coins we had stolen here into a jute bag and writing the name of the company on the front. Then I placed the whole thing into my sack and stood up once more. "Let's not overstay our welcome. We ought to get moving."

I left the vault, closed its sturdy metal door, and placed my hand against the red symbol in its center.

"Close."

The magic activated with a small chime, and the vault door automatically

locked. Bigger companies had access to more security measures, of course, but even the smallest vaults were reinforced with physical and magical wards, plus alarms to detect intrusion. To unlock all of these contraptions, each vault or safe was paired with a magic item that served as the key, usually kept on the owner's person. Obviously, it would have been far too much effort for us to go around and nab them all, especially since we wanted to remain covert.

Fortunately for us, the Mana Storm had torn a hole in the vault's magical defenses, one I could exploit using the Tailor's Hook of Mending without expending too much MP. Now all that I needed to do was feed the antidote to Minnalis's poison to the guards currently napping out front.

"That should do it."

In a few minutes, they would wake up with no recollection that they'd been asleep at all.

I made sure no one was watching, then left via the backdoor to quickly disappear into the crowd outside.

"Come, one and all! We've got a discount on potions today! How about you, lad? You look like you're on your way to dispatch some monsters! Wouldn't want to leave town without some of my concoctions under your belt!"

Back on the main road, this particular trading company appeared to be conducting business as usual. Before staging my breakin, I'd happened to overhear that they'd recently upgraded from a store to a company through their wealth and connections.

"Hey, you over there! Wait! Hold up, I said!"

"...Hmm? Me?"

I looked back at the building I had just left to see one of the traders beckoning me over.

"You're an adventurer, aren't you? I can tell by your garb, even if your muscles aren't anything to write home about. My potions'll beef you up good. You have my word."

The woman wiggled the glass beaker in her hands for emphasis.

“Hmm... Well, I can tell it’s a good HP potion, that’s for sure,” I said. My “Appraise” skill identified it as a *Basic HP Potion (High Quality)*.

“Oh, you can? What a keen eye you have, sir. And here I took you for a novice.”

“Let’s just say I’ve had my fair share of adventuring. Do you sell MP potions?”

“Of course we do!” the trader replied. “Our herbalist is a skilled practitioner who can craft anything from restoratives to ability enhancers!”

The saleswoman went back inside the store and brought out an MP potion. I could see that it, too, was of high quality.

Recovery potions were an adventurer’s lifeline. A merchant who could provide a quality supply without resorting to threats or theft was a rare breed indeed. Seems like there was at least one honest merchant in this place.

“In that case, I’ll take ten. How much is that?”

“Whoa, big spender! That’ll be ten silver coins in total.”

I handed over the coins from my own purse and was given a crate of potions in return.

“Come again! I look forward to doing business!”

“Sure, if I feel like it.”

I gave a wave and left the potion seller behind. It had been a while since I last met such a pleasant person, assuming she was just as friendly on the inside, that is. However...

“I’m sorry, I’ll give all the coins back later. Just try to stay in business for now...”

I knew it was wrong, but that didn’t mean I could waver. My vengeance demanded it. My enemies would pay for their crimes with death. I wouldn’t kill without reason, but some collateral damage was inevitable. I knew that didn’t make it right, but I was done with living my life by what ethics demanded. I would do whatever was necessary, ethics be damned. The hero I had once been was long gone.

“Whoops.”

Lost in my thoughts, I’d accidentally bumped into somebody, knocking them to the ground.

“Oof!”

“Eek!”

The girl... No, the boy, was wearing what looked like a military uniform. A beret sat atop his long blond hair. He was about the same height as Shuria, and he had slim, catlike eyes.

“That hurt! Look where you’re going, rawr!”

“...”

From out of nowhere, I had run into none other than Nonorick.

“Somebody ought to tear you to shreds for bumping into a cute girl like me!”

He puffed up his cheeks and pouted just like a precocious young girl, despite the fact he was most certainly not a girl. I could vouch for that. Don’t ask me how I knew; I don’t want to remember. Face-to-face, however, he looked convincing enough to make me doubt myself all over again.

“Sorry about that. I was lost in thought. Well, see you.”

I almost lost my head there, but Nonorick didn’t seem to notice. I would undoubtedly have to take care of him at some point before getting to Grond, but now was not the time. Best not to pay attention to him and just get out of there. Just as I was about to, however, Nonorick called out to me.

“Hey! Come back here, I’m not finished with you!”

“...What is it?”

I considered ignoring him and carrying on, but it would have been suspicious to do so after I had already stopped and acknowledged his presence.

“You just gonna bump into a girl and go on your merry way? Give me a real apology!”

He’s got some nerve calling himself a girl whenever it suits him.

“...Fine then.”

I walked over and bought some nice-smelling meat skewers from a food stall at the side of the road.

“Here, you can have these. We’re even now, right?”

“Who would try to butter up a girl with *food*? You’ve got no sense! When was the last time you got laid, huh? Never, I bet!”

“...So what? What’s that got to do with you?”

“Ah, that made you angry, didn’t it?! That’s so cute!”

Nonorick suddenly licked his lips as a very different expression came to his face.

“Hey, why don’t I teach you what it’s like? I’ll show you a world you’ve never dreamed of.”

“I’ll pass. Why do you care about me that much?”

“Because I can smell something amazing about you. You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

“Hng!”

I smelled blood, traveling up my spine and shocking me to my senses. I smelled death in those childish features; they belonged to someone for whom killing was not a necessity, or a drive, but pure sport. I’d caught a whiff of a demon, and it triggered my fight-or-flight response.

“Aha! I knew it! See, you cottoned on so quickly once I stopped hiding it, didn’t you?”

“...What do you mean?”

But I knew it was too late. The boy’s vicious aura had already backed me into a corner. Still, my conscious mind vainly attempted to patch things over.

“Play dumb all you want,” he said, “but we’re two of a—”

“*Shut up.*”

“...Hmm!”

Even I was surprised by the tone of voice I mustered.

“We are not the same,” I asserted. “There isn’t anybody else like my associates and me.”

We were alike in some respects. We all wanted to kill so badly we couldn’t take it. We harbored dark passions that drove us to destroy everything our hands touched. But that was only a surface-level similarity. I couldn’t be called the same as someone like him.

Then just as my emotions were heating up, I received a transmission from Sir Squeaks.

I shouldn’t be wasting time here. I’ll go meet up with Minnalis.

And so I turned on my heel and left without saying another word.



“We are not the same. There isn’t anybody else like my associates and me.”

As the man said those words, I saw his eyes grow dim and dark, like muddy water bubbling up from the ground. A black aura seemed to flow from him. It was exactly what I had been searching for. Then he turned and walked off into the crowd without another word.

“Hmm, maybe I teased him a little too much. He rejected me. That’s no fun.”

And just when I had finally found someone I could have a little fun with, too. This town was starting to get boring, and I was on the verge of cutting ties with Grond and leaving. Taking a bite from the meat skewer in my hand, I walked off toward the safe house that Grond had prepared for me.

“I’d have been able to teach him all sorts of things if he’d only come along with me, too.”

All sorts of pleasant sensations...as well as how to kill a man in enough agony to satisfy those dark, dark eyes of his.

“But I guess it wasn’t meant to be. He seemed to have his guard up the whole time... Perhaps he’s related to somebody I killed on a job or something. But in that case, wouldn’t he have been angrier at me...?”

Nobody would be so guarded against some random young girl they bumped into on the street. But the man had only directed his hatred at me at the last moment of our encounter. He was angry at someone else. And he was trying to hide it.

“But what a shame. *Om-nom*. From what I could tell, I don’t think he was even level 10.”

Taking a nibble of the bread in my hand, I weaved my way through the crowd of boring normal people. It really was a shame. I had never seen such pure, unbridled malice. Just a peek sent a shiver down my spine. Many people got so taken in by the pleasure of killing that they lost sight of themselves, but their hearts were white as snow compared to his.

“But without power, you’re only going to get trampled, you know? No matter how much you want it.”

I tossed the final morsel into my mouth. It was a little too salty for my taste.

“Anyway, time for work, work, work.”

Nothing beat a little workout after lunch. Keeping up a figure like this required effort, after all, and it came in handy for both work *and* play. A flabby tummy was the bane of femboys everywhere.

I sucked off some of the sauce that had gotten on my finger and licked my lips clean before walking briskly through the streets to the part of the town where the air grew stagnant and stale. It felt good to swim around in the murky depths. The waters up top were so clear and pretty that I would get heartburn if I swam there too long. At times like that, I needed to taste fresh blood. Times like right now.

“All right, here it is!” I exclaimed as I came to a boring, rotten trash heap of a building. Inside lay my toys, just asking to be broken. Only killing, playing, and a bit of pleasurable *exercise* could make me feel alive again.

“...Aaagh... Stop... Ghhhh...”

“Settle down, Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

I could hear a voice through the door. The voice of the one I wanted to break

first.



“...Heh-heh. Oh, pardon meeee!” I called out as I entered. The air inside was rotten, clogged with tobacco smoke. Its close, cramped quarters brought back unpleasant memories that made my blood boil.

“Huh?! Who are you?! Can’t you see we’re in the middle of something?!”

“Hey, we got a cutie here. Can we help you, baby?”

“Wahoo! She’s just my type, boys! Hey, come and sit with me. I’ve got something I think you might like, hey-hey-hey!”

The room was filled with several men. Some were leaning back in their chairs, smoking, some were stuffing their faces with greasy food, and others were playing cards, et cetera, et cetera. This place was a gathering spot for the lowest of the low, and in the center of them all, a man with a disgusting, goblin-like voice crouched over a girl who was covered in dirt.

“I don’t know what you came here for, but you’re not getting away! Geh-heh-heh!”

One of them, a man with a body like an orc, came lumbering toward me.

“Oh, what’s this? Are we going to fight, pork chop?”

“P-pork chop?!” seethed the man, red-faced.

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” said another.

“Hey, Togyle! Don’t mess up the first pretty face we’ve had in...ugh. He’s not listening.”

“Aww, man, he’s gonna mess her up.”

“Hey, I always wondered, why does he always get so worked up by that phrase?”

“His first crush turned him down with *‘No thanks, pork chop.’*”

The rest of the sleazebags all sat around laughing. It was a fitting scene for a place like this.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-who you callin’ pork chop?!” the man screamed. “I’m just big-bo—”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I happen to like it. We’re going to have sooo much fun, so just...”

“Huh? Gah?!”

Suddenly, a burst of red blood started flowing from the man’s legs, like a popped water balloon.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

“Just lie down on the floor there for me, please.”

As the man slumped onto the ground, the air in the room fell silent.

“Hmm? What’s wrong? Weren’t we going to play? Come on! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Y-you bitch!”

“You brat!”

“Who’re you working for?”

Now the air was free of doubt, hot and clinging to the skin like blood.

“Don’t worry, there’s enough of me to go around! I’ll put you all to work until my crotch is sopping wet!”

The men’s daggers hit the floor with a clatter.

“Let me hear your cries reverberating throughout your bodies.”

A bubbling, intoxicating rapture overwhelmed me. If I was to swim in a sea of blood, then I would dive deeper than anybody else, for that was the place where I could best hear their screams of pain.

“Um...let’s see. Ah, there it is!”

After searching the room, I came upon a sword still in its scabbard. The sheath was made of wood, and it coiled around the blade. This must have been the magic sword that Grond was looking for.

“Hooray, I’ll get two new toys for this!”

I placed the sword in my magic bag and looked around to survey the results of my playtime. The room was hot like the midday sun, warm with sticky blood. The mouths of the corpses littering the place had been stuffed with twenty-one

rods cut from their own bodies. A very pleasing idea of mine, if I do say so myself.

Their muffled screams as I placed each one with care warmed me right behind my belly button. It was so good I didn't feel bad about bragging, rawr.

The only sound in that room as I gazed around contentedly was the drip, drop of trickling blood. That, and...

"Aaaaaaaagh! Die, diie!"

...the ragged breaths of the girl who had been locked up there, along with the wet noises that rang out as she repeatedly drove a splintered chair leg into her captor's dead body. Her eyes hollow, she continued to defile the corpse, driven only by rage.

"Do you hate him? Do you want to make him pay? Then you have to kill him. Otherwise, you'll stay like that for the rest of your life."

That whisper had been my own. After watching the girl for a few moments, I nodded contentedly and left the room, and her, behind.

"Oh, it feels so good to have done a good deed!"

I walked down the street, using the mana stored within my outfit to cleanse it of blood. With the stench gone, my head cleared, and I felt only a calm satisfaction.

"Ahh, so much fun. La-la-la."

I shivered with anticipation, thinking about the new toys I would soon be allowed to play with. I felt inspired. Perhaps I could come up with a new game to play with them.



"You're late."

In a gloomy back alley, Grond's subordinate grumbled at the tardiness of his informant. The man who'd stepped into the alley didn't seem particularly trustworthy on account of his face being hidden by a large hood, and his timidity was plain to see from the way he nervously eyed his surroundings.

“A-apologies. It took longer than I thought to ensure I was not f-followed.”

“Did you bring the list?”

The hooded man handed over a document to the Grond Company employee.

“Y-yes. Here it is: the list of all merchants, stores, and companies affected by the incident.”

“Very good. Here is your payment, as agreed.”

“Nice. Now I can finally afford a decent whore! Hee-hee-hee!”

“...I’ll never know why a man such as yourself is in a position to look at official documents. What is the world coming to?” muttered the Grond employee, a little put off by the unpleasant smile peeking out from beneath the man’s hood. He turned and quickly walked out of the alley, as though he couldn’t bear to be there a second longer. “That will be all, then. If I have another job, I know where to find you,” he added, over his shoulder.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! ...I believe he is gone now.”

Once he was alone, the creepy man stopped laughing. His tone of voice completely changed, and his body warped and twisted, reverting to the beastfolk girl he had truly been.

“Phew,” the girl said with a sigh. “It is trying to keep that level of illusion up for so long.”

“Good work,” said a man clad in robes as he stepped out of the shadows. “How about an MP potion?” The glass bottle in his hands was filled with a blue liquid.

“Master,” the girl replied. “It’s okay. It did not take any more MP than usual to do that; I’m just tired, is all.”

“Fair enough. In any case, that’s another step of our plan completed,” said the man, a twisted grin spreading across his face.

“Yes indeed. And how have things gone on your end?”

“Pretty well. Ran into some trouble, but things are going well for the most part,” said the man, grimacing a little. Then through gritted teeth, he added, “I’ll

tell you all about it back at the inn.”

“I see. Well, I’m all finished here. Shuria went and got distracted by food and sweets, though.”

“Ha-ha-ha, yeah, sounds about right. Nothing wrong with that, I guess. We’ll look less suspicious that way—”

“No, Master. I mean I don’t want her to fill up on snacks and have no appetite left for supper.”

“...Oh right, yeah,” replied the man after a short pause.

“Make sure you don’t eat too many snacks, either. Okay, Master?”

“O-okay...” the man said, managing to strain a smile in the face of the beastfolk girl’s beaming expression.



I was sitting outside a café, eating a confection made of wheat and goat’s milk that had been lightly baked and drizzled with a sweetener called honey. I was on the job, but I was awaiting Kaito’s next instructions at present, so I was sure I could sneak in a snack in the meantime.

“Mmm, food tastes so much better when you’re not supposed to be having it!”

Minnalis was opposed to food carts, but Kaito and I would often grab a bite when she wasn’t around. It was our little secret.

Minnalis would get all sulky after our dates, which let *me* get flirty with Kaito. It was win-win.

Then again, Minnalis could be a little scary when she was angry. I had to try not to push her too far.

“Eating sweets between jobs. This is the life!”

I was enjoying the days again and starting to forget about what had happened between my sister Eumis and me. When your life is bound by restrictions, each droplet of pleasure is that much more intoxicating to the tongue.

“Mmm, that was tasty.”

Having polished off my plate, I heaved a big sigh.

While Kaito was off sowing the seeds of our scheme, my job was to encourage those seeds to grow by spreading rumors. I was having fun, and it reminded me of the good old days working the fields with Mother and Shelmie in anticipation of the harvest festival. Back then, I would quiver with excitement thinking about the moment our hard work would bear fruit, just like I was doing right now. The only difference was that the voices raised at *this* festival would be much, much louder.

“Ah, I love the expression ‘*sowing the seeds*.’ It just sounds so...dirty!”

“What on Earth are you talking about, Shuria?”

“Ah, Minnalis, you’re back!”

I jumped a little at her sudden voice, but I was in the clear. My plate had already been taken away. The evidence was destroyed.

“Did your impersonation go as planned?” I asked.

“Yes. It was difficult to use my magic in this Mana Storm, but he took our bait. Everything is going just as Kaito predicted.”

Minnalis sat down across from me and smiled.

“That is good news!” I exclaimed. “The day our efforts are rewarded draws closer!”

“Indeed. I’ll never know how Kaito manages to come up with these complex schemes. If I were him, I’d only be able to think of capturing the brute and torturing him to death.”

“Same, same!” I nodded heartily before tilting my head to one side in wonder. “...In fact, there are some parts I don’t quite understand, even after Kaito explained them to me. Why is this...‘*recast*...’ such a big deal anyway? Money is still money, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right, but a coin’s value is not only determined by the amount of precious metals in it. It is also backed by the country that minted it. Reducing the gold content in its tender is proof that the country’s finances are struggling, and so the level of trust goes... Are you following?”

“Um... Heh-heh, what?”

I wasn't good with complicated things like this. Kaito was a genius, but Minnalis was also fairly impressive for being able to make sense of his plan.

“Hmm, you don't get it, do you...? I know, think about it this way. Would a spoon used by Master and a spoon used by some random guy have the same level of collectability?”

“Oh, no, they most certainly wouldn't! I know that!”

“The thing with the coins is like that... Anyway, let's get back to work. Oh, but before that, we should pick out what we're having for supper.”

“Oh, meat! I want meat!”

“Really? In that case, we'll have fish. After all, it seems you like this shop's sweets more than my cooking, don't you? Enough to sneak off and have some without telling me.”

“Hweh?!”

H-how did she know?! My plate was gone when she arrived!

“You can't trick a beastfolk's sense of smell that easily, Shuria,” Minnalis said, poking me on the nose.

“Oh no! I'm so sorry, Minnalis! Please forgive me!”

“No. Good grief...”

Minnalis stood up to leave, and I chased ruefully after her.



In a tavern just before dusk, Shuria and I downed our flagons. Normally, the bar would just be getting crowded around this time, but today it was already packed full, and the sound of boisterous laughter filled the air. Thanks to the Mana Storm, monsters were blocking the highways in and out of town, and it was so hard to cast magic that only the richest merchants could afford the adventurer escorts required to make it through the blockade. As a result, many of the town's traders had no choice but to while away the evening in taverns such as this one. In this world, the primary amusements were wine, women,

and wagers. That made taverns the most natural place for people to gather.

“...And they say that man bore a grudge against merchants ever since. His ghost steals from traders indiscriminately to this day.”

“There’s also stories that the ghost plays tricks on merchants.”

“Hah-hah-hah! Is that right?”

Another man’s raucous laughter contributed to the hubbub of the barroom.

“What a lovely tale to go with my ale. Indeed, if it’s a ghost or specter causin’ all this mischief then there ain’t much I can do. I’ll have to keep my eye out. You two make fine storytellers, young lasses.”

“Oh no, we small merchants must swap stories like this just to survive. Such a small theft may go unnoticed among the larger companies, but it may well wipe out our entire livelihood.”

“That’s true. The amounts goin’ missin’ are all different, but I’d still rather pack up and move on to the empire as soon as possible after my meetings are over. Seriously, why did we have to get trapped in a Mana Storm now, of all times...?”

The merchant we were talking with gave a deep sigh.

“Indeed, it is almost impossible to travel the road to the empire now with all the monsters around,” I said.

“You said it, sister. And what’s worse, my business meeting tomorrow is with that Grond Company you were just talking about.”

“Oh, is it really?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure I buy the rumors. Seems like a lot of work for a large company, just to get back what to them is a paltry amount of cash, but still... They do seem rather reluctant to buy up goods at the moment.”

“...And?”

“Apparently, it’s because they’re looking to set up shop in the empire. And I brought these goods all the way here hopin’ to sell them at a profit, too. Argh, what a drag... *Glug...glug...* Paah!” The merchant drained his wooden flagon in a

single swig before continuing. “Ehh, sorry ’bout that. I get a little grumbly when I’m drunk. I hope the roads are clear by the time I’m done with my business tomorrow.”

“Unlike those with stores and companies, it’s rather difficult for traveling merchants such as ourselves to afford a costly escort,” I agreed.

It was prohibitively expensive for merchants to charter armed guards at the best of times, let alone when the roads were blocked by powerful monsters as they were now.

“I am sure everything will be okay,” Shuria reassured him. “I’ve been in a Mana Storm before, and it didn’t last too long.”

“That right? Then I think I’ll hit the hay soon so I can be up bright and early tomorrow. I’ll be taking a big loss if I don’t sell these goods, so I’ve gotta be quick about it.”

“Things are tough right now, but I’m sure you’ll manage.”

“Good luck!” Shuria added.

“Yeah, same to you two. Must be tough for a pair of sisters to make it as merchants these days.”

The chair clattered as the man rose to his feet, and he finished off a handful of salted beans he’d ordered to go with the ale. Then just as he was about to leave, he stopped. He turned back, scratching his cheek nervously.

“H-hey, if you wouldn’t mind, perhaps we could partner up to do business...”

“I am sorry,” I answered, cutting him off, “but I have already offered my body, my mind, and my soul to somebody else.”

“All my firsts will have to go to my master, so that’s a no thanks from me,” added Shuria.

“...Right. Well, then.”

The man’s shoulders sagged in disappointment, and he turned and left for real. He was lucky I didn’t say what was really on my mind, which was “*Don’t be so disgusting, you filthy swine.*” I wouldn’t want to pour salt in the wounds of a man who had already lost all his earnings, after all.

“Okay then,” I said. “Shall we move on to the next tavern?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Shuria.

Leaving the payment for our fruit juice on the table, we notified the bartender and left the pub. The streets before dusk were dyed in orange hues. The bars would only be getting busier from here on out.

“Now, where should we go next?” I asked.

“Hmm, that place looks good,” Shuria suggested, pointing to another tavern.

“We can’t go there,” I warned. “That place serves food as well, so it would look a little odd for us just to order drinks.”

“Aww, but the meat smells so delicious...”

“I don’t want you to lose your appetite for supper. We’re having dessert as well. Plus, you’ll get fat.”

“D-don’t say that word! Anyway, I’m a growing girl. It’ll be fine!”

“Tee-hee, I was only joking. As long as you finish your plate, there won’t be a problem.”

“Are you saying you’ll punish me if I don’t? Ooh, that might not be too bad...”

“Keep acting like that and you’ll get no supper at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

What was I going to do with this girl? Master had really managed to unearth some odd tendencies in her.

“In any case, we need to find an appropriate place...”

“Hey, ladies. Lookin’ fer a good time? *Hic.*”

““ ... ””

Just then, a rosy-faced gentleman approached us.

“I know a *real* good place, somewhere we won’t be disturbed. Why don’tcha come along wit’ me? *Hic.*”

If the man’s overly friendly attitude and slurred speech didn’t give away his state of mind, then the rich smell of alcohol on his breath surely did.

“...*Haah*, I’ve had it up to here with your kind.”

“Please go away.”

My sigh this time was laden with way more resentment than when I’d been playing around with Shuria.

“Let’s go, Shuria.”

“Yes, quite.”

With drunks, paying them any sort of interest came back in spades. Thus, we completely ignored the man and attempted to walk farther down the street.

“H-hey! You two’s tryna ignore me? My name’s Golunda an’ I’m a C-rank adventurer, ya know! You girls should be squealin’ with happiness to see me in the flesh!”

“...You’re proud about being C-rank? That’s so pathetic it’s not even funny.”

“Huh? What was that? Oh, I geddit... You’re so starstruck you dunno what to say, I get it! *Hic*. You two’re adorable!”

The man continued to follow us as though he hadn’t quite grasped the intent of my words. Well, I couldn’t exactly blame him for doing as he wished under cover of drunkenness; Shuria and I used that excuse all the time to get touchy with Master. This guy, however, was really starting to push his luck.

“Whoopsie, my hand slipped!”

“Hh?!”

The drunk man suddenly reached for my bottom as though it were an accident. Naturally, I twisted myself out of the way easily before he ever made contact.

“You little...!”

I had only seen this man as a nuisance previously, but now I registered him as an enemy.

My body belongs to Master, and Master alone...!

Not only that, but he was going for my tail, Master’s favorite part...! That deserved death! An execution, I say!

“Uh-oh. I believe Minnalis has lost it,” said Shuria, but I had more important things to do than listen to her. I wouldn’t *kill* him, of course, but he could stand to lose an arm or two.

“Oh, come on, don’t move outta the way... Whoops, my hand slipped ag—”

I had thought my overflowing rage plain to see, but the lout was hopelessly oblivious, as a consequence of either the drink or just his general small-headedness. The Mana Storm would prevent me from blasting him with a quick spell, but I didn’t need magic to cut off his wandering hand.

I won’t kill you. I’m just going to teach you a lesson, I thought. I was just about to draw my sword when...

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t stand idly by while you lay a hand on those women.”

...a thin, elderly man carrying a shopping bag grabbed the drunk’s arm.

It was Fegner Rielt.

Master had warned us about this man, who was dressed smartly in a black tailcoat. A crowd of onlookers was slowly gathering around our little disturbance. This was a most displeasing turn of events.

“Oh no. What an annoying coincidence,” whispered Shuria.

“Indeed,” I replied, keeping my eyes on Grond’s most faithful retainer. Fegner gently guided the drunk’s hand away, wearing a friendly smile on his face.

Wherever there’s trouble, he’s always there. Sigh.

At this point, I had no choice but to lay my anger aside. I shared a glance with Shuria, and we decided to keep quiet and watch what unfolded.

“Huh? What makes you think I wanna hold yer hand, old man? *Hic*. Leggo! I’m tryna touch a girl’s arse here! *Hic*.”

“Please calm down, sir. The only time a man can lose himself in liquor is after he has said good-bye to a dear friend.”

“Who gives a shit?! Leggo of me already, old man!”

“Hmm. Then I am afraid you leave me no choice.”

“What now? Ow! Owowowowow! Stop!”

There was a cracking noise as Fegner displayed the fearsome might of his deeply wrinkled arms. The fright brought the slurring man out of his stupor, and with a slightly sobered look on his face, he tried to shake himself free.

“Let go! Let go, I said! Rrrgh!”

Try as he might, however, he couldn’t escape Fegner’s grasp. Suddenly, the aged steward released the man’s arm, and the drunk lost his balance and went tumbling to the ground.

Hmm, I remember Master told me something you’re supposed to say at times like this. Oh, yes, that’s right, it was “*get wrecked.*”

“Are you sobered up now, sir?”

“You prick...”

Fegner’s unfazed behavior only served to rile up the drunk even more.

“You bastards’re all screwin’ with me! I’ll mess you all up!”

His pratfall may have sobered him up a little, but it had done nothing to improve his brash behavior. Perhaps it was not my place to comment, as someone who’d lost my reason to anger before. Regardless, the man hastily drew the sword at his belt.

“Now, diiiiie!”

“Oh, dearie me.”

Fegner didn’t even seem to break a sweat.

Wow, he’s fast.

I doubted anyone else in the crowd was able to follow his movements, but Fegner drew the longsword at his belt in a flash.

“I’m afraid you’re too slow.”

There was a metallic *clang*, which echoed in the air for but a moment. While everyone was still trying to process what had just happened, Fegner was already sheathing his sword.

“Huh? Wha...?”

Meanwhile, the drunk only stared, a dumbfounded expression on his face, at the broken hilt in his hand...and the snapped blade, gently spiraling through the air.

“Wh...wh...wh...”

There was no doubt about it—the drunk was now fully awake. His ruddy face had gone white as a sheet, and his mouth flapped open and shut wordlessly, as though he had forgotten how to breathe.

“It seems you have returned to us at last, sir.”

“Ah... Ahh... I...I’m sorry!”

The drunk, fully possessed of his senses again, dropped to the ground as though begging for his very life.

“It’s quite all right, sir,” said Fegner. “Everybody makes mistakes.”

The old man smiled like the attempted assault had never happened, but the raw hypocrisy in his expression made me want to punch him.

“I deeply apologize for ruining your sword, sir. I assume this will suffice as compensation?”

“Uh, what?”

Fegner took a gold coin from his pouch and pressed it into the man’s palm. The drunk was unable to conceal his bewilderment. Setting aside the fact that Fegner had been way too generous, nobody would think to compensate their opponent following a street brawl. The man’s sword was clearly not rare by any stretch of the imagination, and certainly not worth a whole gold coin.

“I think you ought to get an early night tonight, sir. And try to curtail your drinking habit in the future.”

“Er...right, yeah...”

The onlookers parted and allowed the man to leave, scratching his head at the curious encounter. Following that, the crowd dispersed as well, their entertainment for the night plainly over.

“...”

...I really, really didn't like it. This farce, the drunken fool who tried to lay his dirty hands on me, the idiots who came over to watch the fight thinking they were so much better than it, but above all...

"Are you unhurt, milady? I thought that had the potential to go quite poorly, so I stepped in. I do hope you don't mind."

Above all, it was the fact that Fegner had stepped in to help without ulterior motives, without malicious intent; it was the fact that this man had been allowed to do a good deed that shook me to the core more than anything else.

"...Yes. You didn't have to get involved."

Disgust wormed its way into my voice before I could stop myself. I should have just thanked him politely and went on my way, but my emotions would not let me.

"I do apologize. I do not think that man meant to offend, so would you find it in your heart to forgive him?"

"It's okay, I wasn't going to kill him," I said.

"You just thought he could stand to lose an arm or two, you mean?"

"So what if I did?"

"It's just that I am something of a pacifist myself."

"..."

I looked into the old man's gentle smile, and it irritated me even more.

I can't stand it, I can't stand it, I can't stand it!

"Just where do you get off, barging in on—?"

"Minnalis!"

Shuria hastily whispered my name and tugged on the sleeve of my maid uniform.

...Yes, I get it. It's not worth getting into a fight here.

"Mm. Yes, quite. Let us be off then," I replied, and the two of us turned to leave.

“Please wait,” Fegner called after us, stopping us in our tracks. “You two seem to be in a spot of bother. If I may be so bold as to offer a word of advice, you are both still young. This world is filled with more kindness than you realize, if only you would open yourselves up to it.”

“...Kindness? In *this* world?” I muttered, my back still turned.

“Indeed. It is not all doom and gloom. I don’t know what you two have been through, but rather than live in hate, you would be a lot happier if you simply open your— *Hrh!*”

“Yes, you’re right. This *was* a happy world.”

A world where I could live without doubt, like a beautiful picture on the surface of a brittle, stained-glass window. That was the world I’d lived in up until that fateful day.

“...”

I spun around to face Fegner once more. All the indignation had left my face, replaced with a pleasant smile.

“My name is Minnalis, sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

I lifted the hem of my skirt and bowed. Then I turned and slowly walked away, making sure not to let him stop me this time.

“You can’t do things like that, Minnalis!” Shuria warned me when we were finally out of earshot.

“...I’m sorry.”

She didn’t need to tell me; I was well aware of it myself. Fegner would get his comeuppance soon enough. We didn’t have to rush it and blow our cover.

But I just couldn’t help it.

A beautiful world, free of hate? I had lived in that world and been blind to the thick smoke billowing out from between its seams. All I had left of it were these shards of glass stuck in my palms, and a roiling anger.

That old man talked like he knew everything, but he knew nothing of my pain.

He’d smiled as though he had done a good deed, when in reality he was party

to the very kinds of violence he denounced. There *were* people who lived in the happy world he'd described, but where was he when his employer dragged them through the mud?

He was right here, saying things like *There is kindness in this world*, or *All you have to do is open yourself up to it*. Cheap words. It was a laughable, depressing farce.

Plus, it was even harder to hold back since his conduct reminded me of *him*.

"My father. He's just like my father..."

My father had been kind to everybody, always eager to offer a helping hand. Everyone in the village loved him, and so did I. But he'd tossed my mother and me aside as soon as helping us became a threat to his own standing. From that moment on, he was no longer the father I loved.

"The nerve of him... To intervene in our fight and then have the gall to tell *us* how to live our lives."

"Fegner is not your father, Minnalis."

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't mean I can let him get away with it."

I knew. I had to bide my time, wait for the opportune moment. For if he continued to stand by his master, Grond, his hypocrisy would soon become clear.



"My name is Minnalis, sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Her words sent a shiver down my spine and caused my words of advice to catch in my throat. As I faltered, the two girls turned and disappeared into the crowd, looking as though they hated the world and everyone in it.

Dear, oh dear. I must be growing feeble in my old age... Or perhaps it is because those girls hold more resentment than I could have possibly imagined.

I hadn't felt bloodlust that strong since I put my warrior days behind me. I should have known there was nothing I could do to heal the broken heart of somebody I only just met.

“...I don’t regret stepping in, but I’ve lived too long if I’m trying to tell others how to live.”

I released a long sigh and began to walk once more. Humans were forgetful creatures. These days, I could no longer remember how I felt about the brother I had slain. I remembered that I hated him and everyone around me, but that distaste was so distant now it felt as though it belonged to someone else entirely.

...I suppose that is what it means to exact revenge.

“Perhaps those girls will one day find someone who can do for them what my master did for me.”

After all my hatred had dissipated, leaving me a broken shell, it was my master who took me in. Now that he was no longer with us, his son, Grond, my new master, had picked up the business where he had left off. Truth be told, he could get a little attached to his money, but it was that love which had grown the company to what it was now, in accordance with my master’s dying wish: for the Grond Company to tower over all others.

And now we were only a single step away. If we could secure a subsidy from the kingdom’s recast, the Grond Company would be the biggest game in town, by far. Its status would be solidified beyond all doubt.

...That is why we had to be careful. I had just been on my way to finalize some arrangements and had not expected to be waylaid.

Still, I sense something not quite right about those two...

I hadn’t come across anything about them in my research, but my gut feeling was not so easily persuaded. Though I couldn’t find a reason to be wary of them, I was unable to shake this lingering feeling that they were uncertain elements, either, like grains of sand in the gears of a watch.

“...Perhaps I am merely overthinking it.”

Before I knew it, I was standing before my destination, a warehouse belonging to the Grond Company.

“Well, if it isn’t old man Fegner. Back again?”

“Yes, I have some more business to take care of.”

I exchanged pleasantries with the adventurer standing watch outside, then entered the building. Just as my master had said, it was difficult to amass large quantities of currency without anyone finding out. That was why I’d been spending much of my time here coordinating our business of late.

People were coming and going; the place was busy tonight.

“Hmm, are you all right, sir?” I said, calling out to one of the men. “Your face seems a little pale.”

I believe this man was in charge of maintaining a record of our transactions.

“Ah, Fegner,” he replied, a distracted look on his face. “Well, can you blame me? All this talk of setting up a new office in the empire has us working overtime. The extra pay makes it all worthwhile, though.”

The man gave a tired chuckle. The schedule had been moved up quite a bit to account for our hasty movements. It was no wonder some of the employees were beginning to feel drained.

“Is that medicine I smell on you?”

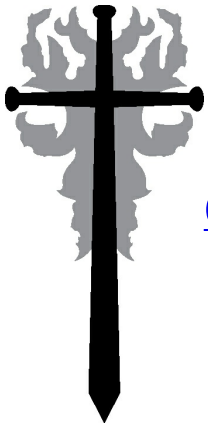
“Yeah. An item shop near me suddenly started selling these cheap, high-quality potions, so I picked up a few to help fight off the fatigue... Only in moderation, though. They’re not *that* cheap, after all.”

“Is that right?”

I couldn’t quite believe his statement. After all, the smell I sensed on him was...

“Well, I better get back to work. There’s still a lot to do,” the man said.

“Mm, ah, quite. Good luck,” I replied, and the man turned to briskly walk away.



CHAPTER 3

The Sound of a Toppling Tower

Day xx Month xx

At long last, my master has completed construction of the facility. When first I heard of his plans, I thought it would make a splendid last hurrah for me before these tired old bones of mine withered away. Thanks to that hero boy the princess brought along, construction has finished ahead of schedule, so there is still plenty of time for me to assist with training the soldiers. For that, I am eternally grateful.

The children from the orphanage will arrive tomorrow. They will be greeted with warm food, laced with just a few tempting drops of Lemonade. Afterward, we will move on to physical fitness, as well as removing any traces of rebelliousness they may still harbor.

Day xx Month xx

The children were just as quick to adapt as I knew they would be. Even the ones who were crying when they first arrived have realized the futility of it after just one week. They can move as slow as they wish, but anyone who stops or deviates from their designated route gets the lash. Again and again, until they do as they're told.

Anyone who defies me receives a whipping, gets fed scraps, is forced to sleep fewer hours, is made to apologize, and then receives another whipping. That teaches them that the only way to avoid pain is following their orders to the letter.

Each of their meals contains trace amounts of powdered Lemonade. Repeated exposure to the drug can build up their resistance to its damaging effects. Additionally, the euphoric sensation it induces helps to keep them focused on their training.

The children learn that doing well in training means a full belly. That is the first step: reducing them to the level of a trained beast. Making them too empty to decide anything of their own free will.

Drugs and training. The carrot and the stick.

And once they are completely hollow, we can start turning them into faithful little soldiers.

Day xx Month xx

There are still some stubborn children who refuse to heed my orders. They are all from the first batch, the ones who came from the orphanage. A girl named Toria leads them, and it seems they were quite friendly with the hero boy when he was around.

I explained to them that the woman who'd raised them back at the orphanage had gone missing, but no matter how much I insisted she deserted them, they kept shouting back that she would never do such a thing, even going so far as to claim the hero would soon be back to save them.

Oh, beloved hero. How I envy you.

But the hero is far from here now, wrapped up in a struggle against the forces of evil.

Not to mention that the hero himself had helped finance the construction of this place; though I doubt they would believe me if I told them that.

In any case, the Lemonade is starting to take effect, and they are only children. Their stubbornness will subside in time if I am persistent in my application of the lash.

Day xx Month xx

Some new children arrived from a different orphanage today. From the empire this time. Accordingly, I took on a few extra staff members, handpicked

from those who had been with the Grond Company for longest. The initial ten were hard enough, but I can't imagine having to keep twenty children under control all by myself. Although I suppose it will only be eighteen after factoring in the two failures from the initial batch.

The new staff will assist me in monitoring the children and preparing their daily meals. The women will be able to provide encouragement, as many of the orphans never knew their mothers. They will also be responsible for mixing Lemonade into the food and feeding it to the children. I will still be there to monitor their progress, of course, but there are certain things that only a lady's finer touch can bring out.

The time has come for us to begin instructing the first batch in the art of killing. It wouldn't do for them to break down too quickly and become uncontrollable, blood-crazed killing machines like our dear Nonorick. A pawn without the ability to think for themselves is useless, for it cannot react to any changes on the battlefield. Ideally, carrying out their orders should bring them the utmost joy. They should retain all their powers of cognition, but the thought of defying orders or the drug should never even occur to them.

Total obedience—that is what I wish to instill in my soldiers. I shall have to take care in how I proceed.

Day xx Month xx

My master came to inspect the facility today. He wanted to see how the children were coming along, and after observing their training, we discussed our next steps over supper. I found myself drawn to his suggestion, as it provided the perfect opportunity to test their progress.

I proposed entering the children in some of the underground fighting matches conducted regularly by the thugs who were handling Lemonade production. Their first test thus being to see if they can kill an opponent whose mind is utterly lost to Lemonade. It would be quite troubling if they could not even perform this simple task, after all.

However, my idea seemed insufficient for my master's liking.

"Make them fight each other. That will sort the wheat from the chaff. We can afford to lose half of them; there's plenty more where they came from."

And so the schedule was moved up at my master's command. I had planned on doing this eventually, so why not begin sooner rather than later?

Our cohort was therefore cut in half, but the surviving group learned a valuable lesson.

Besides, there will be more. There are always more.

Day xx Month xx

It appears I have been careless.

I discovered that a group of children led by that Toria girl had been plotting an escape. I recaptured them, of course, but this is disturbing nonetheless. These children were left to rot away in that place, and I gave them a purpose in life. Why would they go to such lengths to betray me?

I shall have to make sure the training is strict enough that they never harbor such ideas again.

Day xx Month xx

The nations of the world have put out a joint execution order on the hero-turned-villain. It appears they have betrayed him since he no longer served their needs. It also seems he plans to tell the whole world about the alternate-dimension technology he brought with him, over which the Grond Company currently holds a complete monopoly. I always found it suspicious that he parted so easily with the technology that brought the master such wealth, but now I see why.

The hero must be very pleased with himself; he was given a task, and he executed it perfectly.

The demon lord had her armies to protect her, but the hero is only one man. He will be no match for the combined might of the nations of the world.

Day xx Month xx

The soldiers are coming along nicely. They have grown from mere children to loyal servants who follow my every word. The Lemonade now permeates their very beings. We no longer have to mix tiny amounts into their meals but can instead feed them whole pills. Naturally, the children realize they are taking

drugs, but by now the addiction is so great that they can no longer resist. There are even some who train on their own time in the hopes of receiving more pills. That is because in addition to the pills we regularly feed them, there is extra available to anyone who scores highly in their tests. Some of them are even starting to steal Lemonade pills from their peers. That is good. The more suspicious they are of each other, the more receptive they are to our commands.

Day xx Month xx

A problem has arisen. It appears some children cannot handle the negative effects of their additional Lemonade. I had predicted something like this would occur, but the scale is far beyond anything I expected to have to deal with. Luckily, they are still more than capable of taking out their targets.

There have been several influxes of new orphans, but each batch is even less resistant to the harmful effects of Lemonade than the last. It seems that feeding the first children small amounts to begin with really did help them build up a resistance. But even controlling their drug intake carefully will only give them another year of life or so, perhaps three if we're lucky.

My spirits are not too dampened, however. This has all resulted in good data for our Lemonade research, and the first batch always has a few kinks to work out.

Day xx Month xx

The master has requested that I bring the soldiers to combat readiness as soon as possible. The hero is apparently making his way here, so Master wishes to set all of the children against him at once. Indeed, the hero, weak-willed as he is, may find himself unable to raise his hand against such young opponents.

The thing is, their stats are not up to this task at the moment. When I told the master this, he replied, "It doesn't matter if he kills them all this time." Indeed, we have extracted all the data we can from the first batch. They are of no further use to us. They were excellent prototypes, but that is all they were.

Still, they will be plenty strong enough to drive a knife through the hero after we pump them full of Hyperanabolic Acid. They are not long for this world. At the very least, I can allow them to go out in a blaze of glory.

After all, without a goal in life, what worth is there in living?



The air smelled of burning wood. The note said nothing more. I gazed vacantly at the paper in my hands, before consigning it to a fiery grave. Back on the oaken table, as if daring me to pick it up, was another sheet of paper. A list of names. At first, I thought they were the names of the children who had been experimented on here, but I was wrong.

“Fegner, O’Rowly, Ledia, Ardron, Sivy, Bodie, Jud, Monica...”

I see. I don’t know if it was Fegner or Grond who had left me this list, but it seemed they really had a bone to pick with me. For on this sheet of paper headed “To Sir Kaito, the Hero” was a list of the Grond Company employees who had worked here. Nestled among all the names I didn’t recognize, there were two whose faces sprung immediately to mind. One, a kindly, courteous old man, and the other, a smiling, cheerful woman.

This was obviously meant to taunt me. I would surely run into a trap if I went after them. There was no point in reading the rest of the list. And yet I couldn’t stop myself.

So I read on. And there at the end, written under the heading “Failures” as if to mock me, were the names of all the children.

“...”

I didn’t want to take the list with me, but nor did I want to forget the names that were written there. And so I just stared at it, right up until the moment the building’s supports gave way at last.



The chair creaked as I sat down on it.

“Grr. The sheer audacity of those fools.”

The man I had just been speaking with was a representative of one of the smaller companies with whom the Grond Company often did business.

Our meeting, usually little more than an exchange of pleasantries following a successful deal, had this time taken on quite a different tone. They made quite

clear the source of their displeasure: the sudden disappearance of all the money we had paid them from their coffers, as well as all the goods they had bought from us.

There were no clues as to the identity of the culprit, and so, looking for someone to blame, the company sought to hold *us* accountable.

“He has the nerve to demand half their losses in compensation? Preposterous. Isn’t it *their* job to protect their own assets?”

The only reason I was still mad about it was because I had given in to their request and agreed to compensate them 20 percent for the incident. A small sum, but an expense I was loath to grant nonetheless, and not something I would have done for just any business partner.

The payment had been transferred to their warehouse immediately upon completion of the deal, so legally speaking, we were in the clear, even if their money had disappeared soon afterward. Still, I’d acquiesced to the request because this partner in particular was no ordinary company. We relied on them for some of our illicit dealings, such as illegally trafficked slaves, contraband drugs, poached monster goods, and fenced magic items.

Of course, the scale they operated on was nothing compared to our Grond Company, but unfortunately, that was no reason to take them lightly. Soon they would all be brought into the fold, but now was not that time.

“...Well, the money will all come back to me in due course. Besides, it would be even worse if that company went out of business.”

They had many valuable connections to the underworld. I needed to keep up relations with them for the day I finally *disposed of Nonorick*.

My nephew was a useful pawn, but I did not intend to look after him forever. It was not a question of money; he was a mad horse who had the potential to trample its rider, a bloodthirsty killer who was merely toying with the chains of reason that bound him. And I knew. I knew that the slaves and the work I gave him did not keep him happy for long. I knew that when he acted in his lustful way before me, that he was desperately seeking anything in this world that would keep him from drowning in a sea of tedium.

I couldn't predict if he would turn his fangs on me one day. Skilled agent though he was, that risk was simply too great. Fortunately, our contract was drawn up such that either one of us could cancel it at any time. If I simply terminated our contract, he would soon disappear, just like a child's interest in their latest toy. But ending it now would much reduce my influence in the underworld, and that could impede my future business. I had to seize the right time to act. At the very least, I couldn't cut him loose until all of his tricks and connections were mine.

"This was the correct decision. It is a necessary step."

I repeated that fact to myself, justifying the money I had paid out. You had to spend money to make money. Coin spent on the future was never wasted.

They're no fools, either. They have to keep up appearances, and for that they'll move heaven and Earth to find out who did this. Cash doesn't just go missing on its own. When they do find out who's responsible, I'll make him pay for what I've had to do.

I focused on work for a little while after that before there came a knock at my door.

"Look who's here, Uncle! It's your cutie-patootie, Nono! 🎵"

"...Can you keep it down? I'm trying to get things done."

"Oh? In a funk, are we? You'll change your tune after you see what I've brought!"

Nonorick reached into his sack and pulled out a sword in a familiar looking sheath. It was the Leafstone Blade. He levitated the sword into the air and brought it over to my desk. It landed with a thump. As I inspected its magical aura, I saw that it was far purer than that counterfeit the traitor had brought me the other day.

"Hmm. Fast work, Nonorick. This is the genuine article; of that there can be no doubt."

I had no talent for casting magic. Instead, I had long cultivated my skills at sensing it, so I could tell that the sword before me was no fake.

“I hope you have those two toys you promised me,” said Nonorick.

“Worry not, I shall write a letter of referral to a slave dealer I know and pay you enough gold to purchase two criminal thralls. You’ll find them with my subordinate.”

“Yay! I’ll try not to break them so fast this time!”

“Do as you wish. I have something to do right now...”

I rang a bell and signaled for Fegner to be brought to me.

“You called, sir?”

“Fegner. Arrange for this to be delivered to the empire.”

I handed him the sword.

“Understood, sir. However, it may take some time. At present there are a large number of monsters blocking the road to the empire as a result of the Mana Storm.”

“Ah, yes, of course. The storm itself is currently receding, is it not?”

“Aww, it is? It was fun seeing everybody struggle with it,” said Nonorick.

“In my experience, yes, it will not last much longer,” remarked Fegner. “Judging by the current rate of decay, I would say that it will be gone in a week or two at most.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “The guild will send adventurers to clear the path ten days from now, so I believe it is prudent to wait until then before departing.”

“...Ten days, huh? Hmm, fine. We still have to sell off all our stock to the other companies. Once we have completed those negotiations, we shall go to the empire. The sword will be in your safekeeping until then, Fegner.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Oh yeah,” said Nonorick, suddenly remembering something. “There was one more thing I wanted to tell you.”

There was a sour look on his face. “Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No, not with me. It’s just that I’ve noticed a lot of nasty rumors about your company circulating in the underworld.”

“What?”

Now it was my turn to make a face.

“Things like...you know how a lot of money and stuff has gone missing from the other companies and shops?”

“...I’ve heard, yes.”

One of my reports did mention a spate of thefts as of late. After bribing the watch, I’d learned the names of the fifteen or so companies that were affected, and most of them were unrelated to our business. We had only traded with two or three of those companies directly, so I had decided to let the watch handle the case for the time being. I’d thought the culprit would not go uncaught for long, but it seemed he was more skilled than I had anticipated, because even now the watch hadn’t a single lead to go on.

“I expected that matter to be resolved by now. Those incompetent fools at the watch... What do they think I pay my taxes for?”

There were doubtless even more cases that they didn’t know about, too. Having your coffers raided in the middle of town was a blot on your company’s reputation. The people might have some sympathy if bandits attacked your caravan out on the road, but you were expected to protect it yourself in the heart of the city. If the theft was small enough, many companies would opt to save face by keeping the incident a secret rather than reporting it to the watch.

That was probably also why the news spread much quicker on the street than the paltry list of victims would seem to imply.

“Well, there’s a lot of people crying *‘It’s a ghost!’* or *‘It’s the Spirits’ revenge!’*” explained Nonorick. “But some of them are saying it’s your company that’s responsible.”

“What?”

That was the last thing I expected to hear. “Wait a minute. Why is that?” I asked.

“Because every last copper of the money that went missing came from your company,” the boy replied. “The stories are all so vague I couldn’t get any details, though.”

So what were people trying to say? That I’d rigged the coins with some sort of spell that would bring them back to me?

“You’ve been trying to sell off all your things, right Uncle? And people are starting to figure out about your drug business that went under the other day. I’d say your reputation has already left the gutter and is floating down the river as we speak!”

Nonorick chuckled at his own joke and sneered at me.

“Please wipe that disgusting smirk off your face,” I said.

“Sorry! *Pleeease* don’t get mad at me!” he sang, letting out a shrill cackle.

“They think *I’m* behind all this? Ridiculous. There are companies I’ve never even dealt with on that list!”

“The thing is, the small companies don’t have the money to deal with the watch like you do, so they wouldn’t have seen it,” answered Nonorick, rolling over onto his back.

“Then how do they even know it’s our payments that went missing in the first place? It’s not like the money was all sitting in their vaults, divided out into crates marked *‘From Grond.’*”

“Apparently, that’s because the money that went missing is the same amount as what you paid them, right down to the copper. Even when there was loads more cash to steal right there.”

“Wh-what? How could that be?”

“And the funny thing is, I think the rumors are being spread on purpose. You know those guys—the slicks or the slacks or whatever they were called?”

“The Slugs?” I corrected.

“Yeah, those dudes! I think the people spreading rumors are the same ones who took them out!”

“...Really?”

“Really, really. And whoever they are, they’re good at hiding their tracks. I’m still looking for clues, but my gut tells me they’re behind this. You wouldn’t doubt a woman’s intuition, would you?”

The conviction with which Nonorick made his deduction in the same breath as admitting he didn’t have enough information was quite admirable. He narrowed his eyes into a squint and smiled.

“Uncle,” he said. “Seems like someone has a grudge against you.”

“And who would that be?” I protested. “I’d never make an enemy out of someone so powerful. Grrgh, curse it all!”

I was furious. Somebody was making a fool of me from the shadows, and I didn’t even know who they were.

“Your tea, sir.”

“Ah, thank you.”

As if on cue, Fegner handed me a saucer and teacup of black tea. Its rich aroma filled my nostrils and instantly defused my temper.

“...*Phew*. Perhaps I was a little hasty. This may yet turn out in our favor.”

The truly great companies, the likes of which I wished to do business with in the future, undoubtedly had spies of their own. Their first order of business would be to interrogate the watch, where they would inevitably come across the same list I had. That would prove the rumors had no basis.

The small and medium businesses, however, were a different matter. Only those with wide networks would succeed in discovering my innocence. As such, those who saw the truth and trusted me were reliable and promising, while those who believed whatever they were told would surely go bankrupt soon enough.

“Nonorick. You are to continue your investigation and sniff out whoever is responsible for this. One way or another, we need to prove that my company had nothing to do with it.”

“Yes, sir! Another job, another job, woo-hoo-hoo! 🎵”

He leaped up from the sofa and skipped out of my office in a rather pleasant mood.

“Fegner,” I said. “How much cash have we scraped together?”

“I’ve had to be a little heavy-handed with our business partners, but after a couple more deals we should have the money we need, sir.”

“I see. Then keep selling off our goods as you have been doing.”

“Very good, sir. Then I shall take my leave. Please excuse me.”

Impeccable as always, Fegner gave a neat bow and quietly left the room. He was the complete opposite of Nonorick.

“Phew. And after my tea I think I shall return to work myself.”

Sipping what remained in my teacup, I enjoyed the rest of my short break.



This was the first sound of collapse.

Grond had built himself a tower of gold that extended to the heavens. But unbeknownst to him, Shuria, Minnalis and I were carefully chipping away at its base. Coin by coin, so carefully that not a single tremor betrayed our actions.

The higher the tower, the greater the fall. I was waiting. Waiting for the moment he sought to build the next story of the tower, so I could pilfer the final piece while he was unprepared.

And here it was. The first echoing chime. The first indication that something was wrong. The first suggestion that the ground beneath his feet was about to give way.

I turned my hand, and the tower’s last support fell from my palm.

“The stage is set, Grond. Come, I’ll let you taste the moment I tear your precious values to shreds.”

In the midst of the swirling blizzard, in the depths of the roiling furnace, we would find your deathbed.

“And there you shall die. Drowned in the sea of gold you love so much, Grond.”

The sound of the final coin striking the ground was music to my ears. For it was Grond's death knell.



"Phew. With that, the negotiations are complete."

I signed my name to the last of the documents. The pile of papers atop my desk was finally gone. I felt immense satisfaction at putting away a day's work, but that sensation was tinged with discontent as I thought back to the events of earlier.

"Those companies are even blinder than I realized. How could I have not seen it sooner?"

It turned out that nearly every single one of the small-to-medium companies I had dealings with had ended their business with me after hearing the rumors. I couldn't help but feel disappointed. After all, I had thought some of those companies to have shrewd decision-makers at the helm. Now only the big companies that had taken no losses would deal with me, as well as the ones we had too much dirt on for them to pull out.

"Hmm. At least we still have the subsidy coming down the line. We shall have to wring every last drop of profit out of it."

The winds would soon change, once we got our hands on the government payout. Then everyone would leap at the opportunity to become a valued partner of the Grond Company. Plus, it was easy to imagine that a little compensation would be in order for remaking our contracts so soon after breaking them. We would make them pay dearly when they came crawling back.

It is vexing at the moment, but I must think of the future.

The Mana Storm was dying down, so the guild would soon be along to clear the roads. Once communications were back online, news of the recast would quickly spread. Then we could simply distribute a list of victims, along with a list of our business partners, to put these foolish rumors to rest once and for all.

We've siphoned cash from our subsidiaries and any partners with money to spare. Even the largest companies in town won't be able to compete with us for

the payout.

In the past, the kingdom had paid out subsidies immediately after deciding the recast. That meant it was possible the money was already being sent to companies in other towns unaffected by the Mana Storm. If that were the case, it was simply too late for any local businesses to get ahead of me now.

“Sir, the presidents of the Ocaria Company, Fouginet Company, and Munate Company would like to speak with you.”

“What?”

Those names were three of the four undisputed rulers of Dartras. The three rival businesses with whom I competed for control of this town. They were companies on par with...no, I daresay they were ever so slightly superior to my own. If anyone had the power to snatch my subsidy away from me, it was one of them.

“About what?”

“They said they wanted to carry out some additional deals...”

Additional deals? At this time?

“Involving *what*?”

“Erm, it appears they wish to buy food, weapons, and potions. It seems they’re stocking up in anticipation of the adventurers arriving to take out the monsters on the road.”

“I see. In that case, leave me. Let me take a moment to consider this.”

“Understood, sir.”

My employee bowed and left the room. I swiveled my chair and stood up. Walking over to the window in silence, I gazed out at the town of Dartras.

“Heh-heh-heh. Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

And I burst out laughing.

“Perfect, *perfect*! Now everything is in place for my company to come out on top!”

Their claim was clearly a cover. If they wanted to buy up weapons for the

coming extermination, there was no need to come to *me*. And while demand for those products would indeed go up, it would not be dire enough for companies as big as these three to have to buy up additional stock.

No, the *true* purpose of these deals was to reduce their currency stores.

They must have heard about the recast and want to avoid taking a big loss. And for that, they have no choice but to come to me, caps in hand... Heh-heh-heh.

The subsidy was an alluring reward, but you had to take quite a risk in reaching for it. The value of all your coins would drop during a recast. The more coins you had, the more value you lost to the purity reduction.

What this meant, then, was that the other companies had given up hope of obtaining the payout. That was the only explanation; there was no way companies as large as those wouldn't have realized the spuriousness of the rumors circulating about me. The lone possibility was that they had come to beg at my feet in the hopes of curtailing their losses.

"Those fools have given me grief for too long. Heh-heh-heh. I'm going to wring the bastards dry."

I couldn't wait to see them brought low in disgrace and humiliation. Soon, very soon now, all that I saw from my office window would be mine. Every last coin that passed through these gates would feel the warmth of my breath. The very lifeblood of this settlement would be in my grasp! I would *rule* this town, however I pleased!

"Heh-heh-heh! Haaah-hah-hah-hah!"

I burst into laughter once more, unable to control myself.

"Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen. I'm afraid my inhospitality is a stain on the name of the Grond Company."

The presidents of my three rival companies were sitting in the parlor, awaiting my presence. I had decided to let them stew there for a while before coming to greet them.

"No, no, we haven't been waiting long at all."

“R-right.”

“...You must be very busy, Mr. Grond.”

The three of them all turned to face me, their expressions unreadable merchants’ masks. But I could plainly see the humiliation and disgrace they had been forced to endure.

“Now then, time is money, as they say. Shall we get on with it?” I asked, a little more brazenly than perhaps was necessary. “What exactly is it you fine gentlemen have come to acquire?”

“...Here. An order on behalf of the Ocaria Company.”

Splendidly masking his frustration, the Ocaria Company president handed me a sheet of paper.

“And here is our order from the Fouginet Company.”

“...And the one from the Munite Company.”

The other two gentlemen handed me their orders as well.

“Well, well.”

Food, iron weapons and armor, basic and intermediate HP and MP potions, as well as stat-boosting and status-effect-clearing medicines.

The amount is smaller than I expected, and the unit price of the goods is relatively low. Did they conspire with each other beforehand?

In all likelihood, the three of them had already met to discuss what they would buy from me and at what price. Despite our company’s size, there was a limit on the number of orders we could fulfill. Holding on to all the goods would only cause the prices to spike, and that would not be very pleasant for the three seated across the table from me.

Well, it’s nothing I wouldn’t do. In fact, it’s exactly what I’d do.

If all you cared about was your own company’s profits, then it was the best decision. However...

“It seems none of you understand your position.”

“““What?!”””

I tossed the three sheets in my hand aside and let them flutter to the floor.

“The quantities are fine. Nothing my company can’t handle,” I explained. “The problem here is the prices. I was thinking something a little more along these lines.”

I picked one of the papers back up, scribbled over it in pen, and then showed it to the three gentlemen.

“...Surely you must be joking, Mr. Grond. Does your greed know no bounds?”

“A-agreed. What we were offering was already well above market price, was it not?”

“Indeed it was! This is preposterous! I’ll not stand for this!”

The three widened their eyes when they saw the amendment I had suggested.

“Really? I think this is a rather fair price myself. We are in a shortage since the roads are blocked, you know. Everyone treasures their own life; these products will fly off the shelves. Even after the roads are cleared, there will still be a lot of monsters around due to the Mana Storm. There’s essentially zero chance of these products going unsold.”

The words flowed like honey from my mouth. Mixing lies and half-truths to spin a most compelling narrative was a merchant’s bread and butter. It only got easier when the things I was saying were completely true.

“I really envy you gentlemen. While I am saving up money to expand my business, you three will be able to reap the bulk of the profits here.”

I gave a booming laugh, then continued. “Although perhaps I’m in a better position, selling off my entire stock before the storm and moving on to greener pastures rather than having to compete with the three of you. It’s win-win for the four of us, wouldn’t you agree?”

“...Gr!”

As I flashed them a sneering grin, their impenetrable facades fell apart for just a moment, and I glimpsed the humiliation within. Well, of course. While we all stood to profit, it was clear whose gains would be head and shoulders above

the rest. It was as good as telling them to do my work for me.

Yet you still can't refuse, can you?

I was practically ordering them about, but they were in no position to be making demands of me. All the three moguls could do was offer me their unconditional surrender. If they did that, then perhaps they could carry on enjoying the good life for just a little longer.

"...I...I understand. The Fouginet Company accepts your offer."

"...The Ocaria Company, too."

"And the Munite Company as well."

Ahh, the looks on their faces now makes the blood, sweat, and tears all worth it! I've won!

I longed to laugh in their faces right now, but naturally, I didn't let it show. No merchant worth his salt would let his expression slip during a negotiation.

"Ah, I'm glad we could come to an understanding. Then please sign these purchase orders once more."

I had the three gentlemen append their signatures to the amended documents. As they bent over to put pen to paper, it was like they were groveling at my feet. It felt good, *very* good. Taking advantage of the moment their backs were turned, I let my smile show.

Before long, the documents sealing my victory were complete. But what was truly important was not the money resulting from these sales. No, it was the fact that I had the power to force a deal so disproportionately stacked in my favor. I had sent a message to the whole town. A message saying that the Grond Company was to be treated with the utmost respect.

This was a ritual. A ritual to elevate me above all others in this town...

But just as I was gloating in my success, I thought I heard a noise. A far-off creaking.

...What is this feeling I'm getting?

It was an alarm bell I had relied on many times as a merchant. An illogical

sensation that ran down my spine and gave me the chills. It felt like I had just stepped right into thin air.

How strange. But why? What have I overlooked?

Before me were my enemies, brought low in disgrace. The proof of that was in my hands; of that there could be no doubt. I had won, and would henceforth rule this town.

Yet repeating that to myself did not calm the waves in my heart.

I always felt this way when somebody got one over on me, or when I was about to incur a big loss.

“Mr. Grond, we shall keep this copy for our records. Here is one for yours.”

The Ocaria Company president was handing his finished contract to me, and so were the other company leaders.

Is it because of this? Is there some sort of trick hidden in the contract?

It was normal for two copies of a contract to be made, so each party could keep one. That way, neither party could renege and do away with the proof.

I took the contract in my hands and, pulling out a magic item I had concealed within my breast pocket, used it to check for any traps hidden in the text. But nothing seemed out of order.

“Is...there something the matter, Mr. Grond?”

“Uh... No, not at all. Everything appears to be in order.”

I handed the finished contracts to an employee, and he left to put them somewhere safe. Now the deal was well and truly done, and yet I still couldn't shake that feeling of dread.

Why? What have I missed?

Could I have been worrying too much? Was I simply too excited to finally have all I wished for in my hands?

“Now, let us pencil in a date for next month's discussions. I shall be incredibly busy, you see, and will not tolerate any last-minute changes.”

No matter how I felt on the inside, I was still a merchant. Having done all I

needed to, I proceeded with the agenda.

The three companies whose leaders stood before me each had their own individual strengths. The Ocaria Company specialized in ability-enhancing potions, the Fouginet Company in weapons and armor, and the Munite Company in good-quality food and rations, as well as magic items.

Compared to them, the Grond Company was more of an all-rounder, a quite literal jack-of-all-trades with no particular weaknesses. Thus, we regularly sold the other businesses the items in which they specialized and bought up those that did not sell well on the cheap.

Now's my chance. I must strike while the iron is hot...

For some reason, however, the men before me seemed bewildered by my suggestion. Before I could grasp precisely why, the Munite Company president spoke on behalf of the three moguls.

“...Surely you jest, Mr. Grond. We'll have no further business with the Grond Company. In fact, I expected you to be half out the door already.”

“...What?”

As I stared in shock at the man's words, I felt the ground beneath my feet slip. My mind struggled to comprehend his meaning.

What was he saying?

“There's not a business in town who would sell goods to you now. Surely you understand that. You may have covered your tracks, but all the signs point to you. Even the most foolhardy merchant would turn down a deal with you.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?! What is this?”

“We're talking about the missing money, of course—what else? You've had the gall to steal from my subsidiaries, these two gentlemen's, and anyone with a shred of clout in this town, so don't feign cluelessness.”

The other two leaders nodded in agreement at the Munite Company president's words.

I heard a creaking, as if something were jamming the cogs of some colossal machine. I knew I had to do something, but I didn't know what.

“I never thought I’d see the day the Grond Company went out of business.”

“You’re right. Never would have believed it, myself. But given that he hasn’t even tried to be subtle about it, I think I can guess what happens next,” mused the Ocaria president, turning to look at me. “You’re going to sell off all your supplies so that you can buy yourself a lordship, a lovely plot of land in the empire, an early retirement, something like that?”

There was not a trace of contempt in his eyes, but without a doubt, I recognized the disgust directed at a long-valued trading partner who had suddenly stabbed you in the back.

“W-wait, please. What...are you talking about?”

This was wrong. Wrong. These men should know the list of victims. There was no way they didn’t. The people on the list I saw were all small fry, merchants who had never interacted with the big players in town. The thefts had not affected powerful businesses, like those led by the three men standing before me.

“As much as it pains us to admit, we cannot afford to become victims of these thefts as well. That is why we came to you in humility, to return all the money we made trading with the Grond Company.”

“Wh-what? You mean you didn’t come to feed off the fortune I stood to make from the kingdom’s recast...?”

“Recast? What *are* you talking about?”

They threw my words back in my face. The three men all wore puzzled expressions.

We couldn’t converse like this. We were all missing too much information.

I—I just have to make sure the deals go through!

While verbal agreements were not legally binding, a company as large as ours could not hope to prepare the large trade volume required for its monthly deals immediately. That was why we needed to discuss those transactions in advance. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to react if our fortunes suddenly changed down the line. And this month, like every other, we had already signed

contracts promising to sell the goods to companies in other towns wholesale. If we were unable to procure what we promised, then we'd be in breach of contract; the losses would be incalculable.

"H-hold on a moment," I pleaded. "It appears you are missing some vital information."

"Missing information, you say?"

""...?"""

The Fouginet Company president gave me a strange look, while the other two exchanged glances. It seemed they had intuited that something was amiss from my behavior.

"Yes, so let's...just talk this over and—"

Just then, there came a loud knock at my door. An employee tried to barge in.

"What is it?!" I roared, blocking his path. "We're in the middle of an important business meeting!"

"W-well," the employee stammered, pointing, "there's something important I need to say to those three gentlemen there."

"Hmm. Even our employees know we are currently engaged in discussions, so this message of yours must be rather dire. Why don't you let him in, Mr. Grond?"

I couldn't let him in. My gut was churning. Something bad was about to happen, and I knew it. But refusal would only heighten their suspicions further.

"V-very well. You may enter," I acquiesced.

The man walked in and bowed apologetically to the three gentlemen, all of whom cast me a stern look. An immense sense of dread washed over me, made only worse by the fact I was powerless to stop it. The messenger then went over to each of the presidents in turn and whispered something into their ear.

Their eyes went wide as soon as he did, and they all turned to glare at me in fury. It was then that I knew the time for talking things over had passed.

"...Ah, I see. So it was all an act, then."

“You were simply buying time, weren’t you? You went to great lengths to ensure we would only find out now!”

“This is low, even for you! You’ve been making fools of us this entire time!”

Now they took no pains to disguise their rage. They stood up and made to leave, as though they had no desire to discuss the matter any further.

“W-wait! Whatever is the matter? What happened?!”

“Don’t play dumb. I just received word that gold from my vault went missing. And wouldn’t you know it, it was exactly the same amount that I received from you!”

“What?!”

“I can’t believe I was outsmarted by you. And I don’t suppose there will be any evidence linking you to the thefts this time, either. Now, not only have we lost the money from our previous deal, but we lack the funds to fulfill the one we just signed, too.”

“For Pete’s sake! And we’ve already agreed to sell those goods to the guild! This’ll bankrupt us!”

“Do you have any idea how long it’ll take us to recover from this...?”

“Wait... Please wait! Won’t somebody tell me what’s—?”

“Give it a rest! I’m already sick of looking at you. I hope this is the last time I ever see your hideous face!” spat the Fouginet Company president, last in line to leave, before storming from the room and slamming the door behind him.

“...”

I stood rooted to the spot in silence, as though I were frozen there.

“M-Mr. President...?”

“...Get out.”

“...What?”

“GET THE HELL OUT OF MY OFFICE, YOU INCOMPETENT FOOL!”

Like the floodwaters flowing forth from a splintered dam, my words of

passionate fury chased the spineless employee out.

“Eek! I—I’m sorry!”

Even the way he fled out into the hallway pissed me off.

“RrrraaaaaAAAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHH!”

I unleashed all the anger in my heart, picking up a priceless vase and dashing it against the wall, where it exploded into porcelain shards.

“Haah...haah...”

I heard the squeaking of a mouse and saw the rodent dart out of the corner of my eye.

“Damn it all. Haah...haaaaaahhh...”

I sat down on the sofa, crossed my arms, and sighed.

I need to stay calm. How do I get out of this one?

“Sir, there is something important I wish to tell you.”

“Ah, Fegner. Excellent timing. I need you to check something for me.”

“I’m one step ahead of you, sir. Please take a look at this.”

“...? What’s this, the list of theft victims?”

Just as I thought to ask Fegner about it, he presented me with the exact information I sought.

“This first copy is the one we procured through our usual channels. And this second copy is one I just now obtained through my own research.”

“What’s this?! They’re both completely different!”

I ran my eyes over the list as quickly as I could.

“Arly Company, Bead Company... Even those three trading giants I just spoke to. What is the meaning of this? These are all the businesses we’ve had dealings with! Every last one!”

“And I have one more piece of bad news, I’m afraid, sir.”

“What could be worse than this?!” I yelled.

“It appears that even those three companies were victims of the thefts...”

“I already know that. Their presidents just told me as much. That’s why they stormed out of my meeting earlier.”

“Erm, no, sir. It’s more than that. The government has agreed to conduct an official investigation at their behest. They will be auditing our accounts very soon.”

“An audit?! But the timing couldn’t be worse!”

It would be nigh impossible for me to carry out any shady dealings with the government’s hunting hounds breathing down my neck, and with my reputation on the surface also in the gutter, I would be unable to do any business at all. It was like having shackles on both my arms and legs.

“Aaargh! Curse it all! How did it come to this?!”

“...I thought something seemed amiss about the man we left in charge of bookkeeping. I looked into it, and it seems he was under the effects of some sort of magic potion. While he doesn’t remember anything that happened, he must have leaked our business dealings that way. I would suspect this is the doing of the very same persons who seem to bear a grudge against the Grond Company.”

“Those...insolent...wooooorms!”

I balled up the paper in rage.

“Where’s Nonorick?” I asked. “Has he found out who they are?!”

“...I’m afraid not. In fact, I haven’t been able to find him these past few days.”

“What? What is he doing, wandering off at such an important time?!”

I threw the paper ball at my desk in anger.

“Fine, forget about him. You are to take over his investigation, Fegner! Find those responsible for this disgrace and drag them before me!”

“Please stay calm, sir. That should not be our priority right now.”

Fegner did not obey my command. Instead, he cautioned me.

“Please do not forget your duties, sir. You are the president of the Grond

Company. Keep that in mind when you give your orders.”

“But... Grr... Curses!”

I could see the logic in Fegner’s words even through my veil of anger. I bottled my rage, stashed it away, and took a deep breath.

“...Fegner. First, put a stop to all our sales efforts. Then go and request the support of the mayor. I shall head into town and see if I can’t obtain the goods from somebody else.”

“Understood, sir. Do I have permission to dip into our funds to prevent the goods from going out? It was only *business* payments that went missing, after all. Perhaps we can twist some arms with a little *personal* payment to sweeten the deal.”

“Please do. We’re through if we don’t fulfill these contracts by whatever means necessary.”

Fegner gave a quiet bow and briskly left the room.

If you broke a contract, you were required to pay the penalty clause. But usually, one never left it that late. After all, a merchant who reneged on their contracts last-minute couldn’t be trusted and would never do business again.

Instead, a company unable to fulfill their obligations would send the fine ahead of time as a gesture of goodwill. However, any gold I sent to other companies was going missing right now. Nobody in their right mind would accept the money at all.

This meant that if I couldn’t find a way to deliver the goods as promised, it would be the end of my business in this town.

Perhaps I could have made the argument that my hands were tied if there were extenuating circumstances. But the Mana Storm was already dying down, and the roads would soon be cleared. These deals were slated for far off in the future, after the money from the recast subsidy came in. I couldn’t possibly claim that the delays were a result of the storm. And even if the encounter rate stayed a little higher for some time, nobody would ever take that as the sole explanation for my failure.

“I don’t know who you are, but you’ll pay dearly for your meddling. Very dearly indeed!”

I brusquely pulled my coat over my arms before heading out to do something about this frightful state of affairs.

“...But like I say, I would be willing to buy at double our usual price for these goods...”

“Listen, Grond. It seems you are intent on making a fool of me, so let me be very clear: It doesn’t matter how much you pay us if it’s all going to go missing later! Now get out of my office!”

“B-but please, those are just baseless rumors...”

“Baseless? Tell that to my empty vaults! Now get out. I expect our deliveries at the promised time, and that shall be the last I ever deal with you!”

Once again, I was thrown out of the company office. This was the fifth time my proposals had been shot down.

“Curses!”

I was visiting every company I could to fulfill my contracts, trying to somehow scrape together the goods those three big companies had refused to deliver. However, no one was willing to do business with me. In fact, many of them wanted to break off our existing deals, even if it meant paying the penalty clause. To add insult to injury, some of them were refusing to do as little as that, claiming extraordinary circumstances from the Mana Storm had voided the clause.

Curses, curses, curses! I’m offering almost twice market price, and nobody wants to sell!

It was all going to hell.

At this rate, I’ll never do business in this town again!

My growing sense of anxiety was like a bonfire, slowly burning away my rational mind until all that remained was sheer panic. This was made worse by the fact I needed to keep my cool during negotiations if I had any hopes of sealing a deal. And so my pent-up rage was gradually building up like sediment

on a riverbed.

“Grr, why is it so hot today?”

I mopped my sweaty forehead. Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t eaten anything today. I dipped into a nearby eatery for a rather tardy breakfast. It was not the sort of place I’d usually frequent, but I didn’t have the time to find something more suited to my palate, not to mention the time to wait around for such a meal to be prepared.

...? What’s this?

As soon as I entered the place, I felt as though somebody was watching me. I looked around but failed to notice anything out of the ordinary.

...I must be imagining things. The stress is starting to get to me.

I was really losing it, but I couldn’t afford to let up now. As soon as I’d eaten, I needed to go straight back to canvassing the other companies in town.

“Excuse me, I’d like to order...”

“Get outta here, you bastard!”

“Wha—?!”

Without warning, the owner of the restaurant threw a bucket of water at me.

“You’re the reason our supplier’s in the red! Been stealin’ from our business partners, have we? Well, we ain’t got no seats for a customer what won’t pay his debts! Now get outta here!”

“...”

I must have stood there like a blockhead for seconds, taking in the sheer indignity of the situation.

“Y-you sniveling worm!” I shot back. “Don’t you have any idea who I—?”

“You’re the boss of that thievin’ company, ain’t you? Get out before you stink the place up!”

“Gragh?! ”

I was swiftly thrown out of the restaurant.

“You mongrels! My company could squash this business flat! I’ll see to it that you never serve so much as a moldy potato ever again!”

“Hah! Don’t make me laugh. Your money ain’t worth garm shite in this town!”

The restaurant owner went back inside, leaving me alone in the street, but his words still rang in my ears.

Your money ain’t worth garm shite!

Worthless? Money? *My* money, worthless?

Because I could no longer fill my empty stomach? Or wet my parched lips? Or supply my barren stores?

“I-impossible!”

Just as it was dawning on me, I shook my head to be free of those wretched thoughts.

Money, worthless? Preposterous. The very thought was oxymoronic.

It was money. Gold! Riches! It made cities rise and nations thrive!

Money was power. That was true even now. Money would see me through the challenges I faced.

“Yes, that’s right. I have wealth. I must not forget that. Everything will be all right...”

I heard the creaking of a tower swaying to and fro in the wind, but I paid it no mind as I walked on...

...until I spotted three strange figures standing in the road ahead all of a sudden.

They all wore hooded robes, heedless of the blazing midday sun. They blended in with the crowd, so I wasn’t quite sure how I had even noticed them.

I tried to ignore them and walked on. Just as we were passing, however, I heard a voice.

“It’s not over yet. Not by a long shot.”

“...Wha—?!”

I spun around, but the three figures were nowhere to be found.

The voice belonged to nobody I had ever heard before, yet it left me with quite a striking impression.

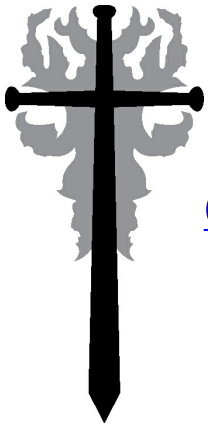
I had a terrible feeling. What was going to happen?



But the bustling street never answered my question, no matter how long I stood there in silence.

Three days later, Fegner disappeared without a trace, taking with him the safe containing all of the Grond company's gold.

It was then I knew the source of the sounds I had been hearing. My tower of golden coins had come toppling down.



CHAPTER 4

A Meeting Beyond Expectations

“...Very well, Mr. Fegner. You have been good to us in the past, and since the thefts did not affect us, I think we can find it in ourselves to agree to your terms. We will accept payment for the breached contract.”

“You have my utmost thanks, sir. Now I must take my leave.”

This made seven. Seven companies I had approached, not as an employee of the Grond Company but as a dear old friend, seeking to cancel my master’s contracts. After closing out the deal and a few pleasantries, I took my leave.

“Seven companies, and only three of them agreed to take the money. This is looking rather grim.”

With things being as they were, the companies were under no obligation to accept our company’s payment. In fact, it would be completely understandable if they were to refuse. That I had persuaded even three companies to accept it was a miracle.

But our stock is still plainly insufficient to satisfy our remaining orders. We need horses, wagons, and item pouches.

It would take quite a toll to patch over all the failed deals by paying the penalty clauses. That meant we needed to acquire the missing goods from somewhere, even if we had to ship them in from out of town. The transport and labor costs would no doubt leave us in the red, but at least we would be able to keep the business afloat.

It was just coming up on lunchtime, so I popped into a favorite restaurant of mine nearby. As usual, the place was sparsely populated, even at noon.

“Oh, Fegner, here for lunch?”

The owner greeted me as I walked in, and I took my place in my usual seat.

“Now, what shall I have today...?”

“Try the grilled fish platter,” said the owner. “You won’t regret it.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll have that, please, thank you.”

“One grilled fish platter, coming up!”

Soon a tray was brought out containing grilled fish and some grain not commonly found in the kingdom called “rice.”

As I began eating, the shop owner sat himself down in the seat across from me.

“Come, sir. I don’t believe the owner is supposed to eat alongside his customers,” I said.

“Who cares? I was just about to take my lunch break anyway. All my other regulars are done for the day, and no new ones ever show up at this time.”

“That was not really my objection...but I suppose you’ve always been like that, haven’t you?”

I had long since given up trying to lecture this man on etiquette. Such things were simply not in his nature.

“Fegner... I’ve been hearing some real scary things about your company, let me tell you.”

“...What things?”

“You know, stuff like how all the money you pay people goes missing... If even a shabby old place like this has heard the rumors, then you must be the talk of the town by now. Don’t worry, mate, I’ll always have your back, but how are things going?”

“The rumors are false, of course, but people are not so easily convinced. So here I am, whipping these old bones into action once more.”

“Listen, Fegner. I know you owed a great deal to your previous boss, but that’s all in the past now, ain’t it? Nobody’d think any worse of you if you just retired and found yourself a nice hobby to live out the rest of your days.”

“Oh? I never thought I’d see the day *you* would be trying to give *me* advice.”

“C’mon, I’m trying to be—”

“I cannot. Even if I wanted to,” I answered immediately. “This is how I have decided to live out my life. If I threw it all away, then everything up until now would have been meaningless. That is what I fear, more than anything else.”

“...You’ve always been a weird one, Fegner. Seems like you can do anything ‘cept take care of yourself.”

“I shall take that as a compliment. Besides...”

I suspect it was my own foolishness that led to this situation in the first place, I thought.

“Besides?”

“Nothing,” I said. “But if retirement is not for me, then perhaps it is time I focused my efforts on raising the next generation. I never thought I would make a blunder like this so far into my old age.”

While I lacked proof, I was fairly certain I knew when everything had started to unravel. There were still a few points that failed to make sense, but I was sure all would be clear once I caught the culprit.

“I shall take my leave. Until next time.”

I stood up, cursing the ineptitude of mine that had led to this state of affairs. I could deny it no longer—I was growing weak in my old age, but I had to continue, if only to make up for my mistakes. Giving up now was unthinkable. Perhaps once all this was over, I could think about the future.

Thus, I put on my hat, left my money on the table, and walked back out into the street.

It had now been three days since I began my efforts. By now, most companies we dealt with had cut all ties with us, and even many of our subsidiaries had jumped ship.

“Haah. I really am getting old.”

I was continuing my search for the culprit in between meetings, and for Nonorick as well, who had somehow gone missing. However, I was unable to unearth even a single clue as to their whereabouts.

If only we could drag the culprit out into the light and prove that they stole the coins... I thought. Just then, something caught my attention.

“Squeak, squeak.”

“Huh? A mouse?”

There, nestled between my feet, was a single rodent. No ordinary mouse, either, but a mouse-type monster. Of course, it looked like a mouse and had all the powers of one—that is to say, none—but it was a monster, nonetheless. Not the sort of thing that would come up to a human of its own volition.

“What’s this? A letter?”

Upon the mouse’s back was a black piece of paper, neatly folded in quarters. The words *“To Fegner”* were written on the exterior.

“We await you tonight at the ruins to the west of town. Tell no one. Come alone.”

The message was penned in silver upon the black page. As soon as I finished reading it, the writing and color disappeared, leaving only a blank white scrap of paper. The location was one I knew; it was just off the road leading to the next town over. A place surrounded by trees, containing little more than the rubble of some long-forgotten building.

“Dear me. And here I thought I put my gambling days behind me.”

I let out a deep sigh, the latest of many this day, and pondered the situation.

This might be the only way to bring things back to normal. I couldn’t let this chance go to waste. Even if that meant walking right into a trap.

I carefully put the note away and headed toward the location described. After leaving the city limits, I walked along the road for a while before venturing into the wilderness and arriving at the hidden ruin. By then it was quite late at night, and the moon’s gentle beams illuminated the desolate place.

There I encountered three figures seated upon the rubble.

“I presume it is at *your* invitation that I find myself here tonight?” I inquired.

“Yep, that’s right,” the man in the center responded. His voice sounded cold and inhuman. At his side were the two girls I had met in town previously.

“Dear me. They do say it takes all kinds, I suppose...”

I should have known. Thinking back on it, the hatred that I sensed shrouding our latest mishap reminded me an awful lot of those two girls. That I had not noticed it until this very moment spoke only of my growing senility. Or perhaps I had simply been away from the battlefield for far too long. In any case, I had only myself to blame.

“As much as I would love to join you three for a drink this wonderful moonlit night, I am afraid I am terribly busy of late. Kindly state your business so that I may be on my way. I presume you three are responsible for the Grond Company’s present crisis?”

“...”

Not a single one of them answered my question. They only smiled.

“I don’t suppose you could tell me how or why you did it?” I asked.

“The how’s a long story, and I can’t be bothered,” the man replied. “The why, however, I will say: It’s because I wanted to see Grond, and you, suffer in the throes of despair. We did everything for that reason.”

“Rgh!”

I had expected to hear those words, but not the intensity behind them. They were soiled black with a hate so pure I could scarcely believe it.

After my brief consternation, however, I was back on my feet, calm as ever.

“I see. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected you to give up your secrets so easily,” I said. “In that case, perhaps you could reveal to me only how you managed to forge that letter so convincingly?”

“Oh, the one telling you about the recast, you mean? I’m impressed you even figured out that was a fake. Took you long enough,” he added, smirking.

“Yes. Everything started with the Mana Storm and that letter. I presume you whipped up the storm by destroying the Dungeon Core. It seems you are more knowledgeable than I first believed.”

“Thanks, I guess. I’ve had my fair share of ups and downs, you could say.”

The man accepted my compliment without a hint of humility. Now I knew beyond all doubt that my fears were true.

“The ink in that letter was made using powder from a crushed Dungeon Core. The message was also encoded using a highly confidential cipher. Both the ink and the cipher are family secrets. How did you get your hands on them?”

“I can’t tell you that. But that’s okay. You already know, don’t you?” said the man, wearing an eerie grin.

“...I see.”

I bottled the emotion rising up within me. “In that case,” I went on, “For what purpose did you summon me here?”

“To get revenge, of course. What else?”

Here the man, whose name I still did not know, displayed a smile truly bathed in ferocity.

“You’re going to die here, I’m afraid. Alone, and screaming in agony.”

His jubilant voice cracked like the mad laughter of a court jester, as though all of hell’s covetous flames spilled forth from his tongue.

“...I’d like to see you try, you petulant child.”

Though my thoughts were composed, a wild anger had taken grip of my body.

“I’ve asked all I wished to ask,” I said. “I’ll hear the rest when I pluck off your wretched limbs. It’s far too late for you to surrender now!”

The surface of my skin flared up with burning rage. It was a sign of my power. My opponents outnumbered me three to one, but so what? It would do them little good. From the magic bags concealed on my person, I quickly drew a pair of short swords and brandished them at the three figures before swiftly changing the one in my left hand to a reverse grip.

“I’ll slice you to ribbons, you milk-drinking brats!”

“Ha-ha! Now *there’s* a look that could kill! Looks like the ‘Blood-Soaked Demon of Battle’ hasn’t lost his touch just yet!”

“...I discarded that title long ago, yet it’s just as loathsome as the day I first heard it.”

“Hah-hah! Yes, that’s the face! I can’t kill you without riling you up a little first —”

Just then, a deafening clang ripped through the air that threatened to blow out my eardrums.

“Aha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wow, you’re good! How did you know I was here?! I didn’t think anyone would be able to block so quickly!”

“Grr, why did you have to show up?!” the man roared. “Get out of my way, Nonorick!”

In Nonorick’s hand was a blade pure white from point to pommel, while the mysterious young man who had blocked his slash had a sword like pitch mixed with blood.

Before my eyes, the two combatants yelled at each other across the still landscape. One a wild beast; the other a dark avenger. The clashing of their blades sounded like shrill, cackling laughter to my ears.



Nonorick’s stealth had been perfect. I hadn’t been able to detect him at all. I wasn’t about to pay him any compliments, but I really had to hand it to him.

Time slowed to a crawl as he leaped from behind some rocks in a low stance, looking to slice me in half with the white blade in his hand. The only reason I responded fast enough to catch his attack with the Holy Sword of Retribution was because I kept thinking: if Nonorick was ever going to ambush me, now would be the perfect time to do it.

“Ng! Gh! Nyah!”

“Rraagghh!”

Our two swords clashed and locked for a moment before I swung my blade to blast him off. Nonorick used that momentum and landed on his feet a short distance away, like a cat.

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s amazing! You forced me back!”

Nonorick didn’t take his feline eyes off me for a second, and there was a sublime joy in those amber pearls. I had hoped to strike at him while he recoiled, but the boy didn’t leave a single opening.

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t expect you to show up.” I sighed, scratching my head. “Fine. Minnalis, Shuria, I guess I’ll leave Fegner to you.”

Though I had seen it coming, the fact that Nonorick had appeared just as things were heating up put a damper on my mood.

“You can’t get greedy, Kaito,” chided Shuria. “You always take the main course, so you could at least let us sample the entrée.”

“She’s right, Master. You mustn’t be stingy now. Besides... This old man is mine.”

“...I suppose so. Right, then as we discussed, you two.”

The two of them were hardly ready to fight Nonorick. It was a shame I’d miss watching Fegner suffer, but I suppose this was how things had to be.

“Hey, c’moon! Have you three finished talking yet? I wanna get back to fighting! I can’t stand it!”

“Oh, cram it, you psychotic freak. You’ll get your fight soon enough. Just hold still.”

I didn’t really have anything against Nonorick personally, but he was my *enemy* as long as he stood between me and my vengeance, so I’d be sure to put him down.

“You think you have the time to talk, vile brats?” shouted Fegner. “Nonorick! Don’t you dare touch a single hair on their heads! They’re all mine! Unless you want me to start with you!”

“Hmm? And here I thought you had some bite to go with your bark,” Nonorick replied. “Sorry, I’m not gonna fight a guy who’s all talk when there’s a *real* man

right here!”

“Huh...? You’re all ignorant children in my eyes. Looks like somebody needs to put you in your place!”

Fegner’s low roar did little to faze Nonorick, who stooped forward with his finger to his mouth, twisting his lips in a seductive grin.

“Besides,” he went on, his smile deepening. “I’m not interested in a dying old man. I’d much rather have my fun with someone juicy and ripe! If you wanted to do me, all you had to do was ask!”

...Tch. So he knows, does he? His senses are as off the charts as ever. This is why I can’t handle natural-born geniuses.

First, I needed to move somewhere else before he spoiled the plan with his big mouth. Everything was pretty much in place already, so it wouldn’t matter too much, but I still didn’t want to give the game away just yet.

“Hey! We’re moving somewhere else,” I called out.

“Waah! You wanna be all alone with me, mister? Oh no, what are you going to do to me? I’m so scared!”

“Shut up. I’m not going to let that sadism of yours ruin the stage we took great pains to prepare. I’m going to kill you and get back in time to watch the show.”

“Mmm... I like that attitude of yours, mister. Hee-hee-hee! Okay! I’m gonna take you right to the edge, and then we’re gonna have so much fun, you’ll never get turned on by anybody else ever again!”

In stark contrast to his childlike stature, Nonorick’s grin was that of a succubus drawing in the hearts of men. With both his arms wrapped around himself, he looked just as coquettish...no, even *more* seductive than any real girl.

“...God. I want to cut out that fucked-up brain of yours right now and leave you to die.”

Why did I have to go up against such a freak? This was really going to leave a sour taste in my mouth. Anyway, I’m sure my spirits would lift again once we started fighting. In fact, I really needed to start as soon as possible to prevent

my mood from dropping even lower.

As Nonorick and I slowly walked elsewhere, keeping our distance from each other, Fegner called out after us.

“I said wait, you damn kids! Grh?!”

Two clangs rang out as his blade was stopped by Minnalis and the suit of armor Shuria controlled.

“Out of my way, wenches!”

“Oh my, you hardly seem like the same person who lectured our ears off the other day,” said Minnalis.

“Your words are cheap, but that mask you wear is cheaper still!” agreed Shuria.

Damn, those two look like they’re having fun, I thought. Dammit!

I wanted to join in. If that made me greedy, then so be it. I wanted to make Fegner suffer, too! I don’t get any satisfaction out of fighting Nonorick!

“Let’s leave him to them,” I said. “We’ve got somewhere else to be.”

“Fine by me,” the boy replied, “but...”

With absolutely no windup, Nonorick came *rushing toward me*.

“Will you even last until we get there?” he squealed.

“...You tricky bastard!”

The clang of our blades rang out in the night.

“M-Master!”

“Kaito!”

“Ignore me! Focus on him!” I yelled back.

““Ah!””

“Haaaarghh!”

Fegner launched himself at Minnalis and Shuria the moment they took their eyes off him. Fortunately, the two of them quickly came back to their senses

and turned their attention back to him.

“Rrgh!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You better stop looking at other girls, too, mister!” Nonorick yelled.

“That suits me just fine, you creep.”

“Oh! Don’t fight back so hard! Do you know how difficult it is to make sure I take you alive?”

“I don’t care, it’s you who’s going to die!”

“Oh, I’m going to #&%* you, then make you \$*@#, then fill you full of &\$%*! Heh-heh-heh! I can’t wait! You’ll look so good wearing a little collar!”

“...I can’t take this. I really can’t take this.”

His words sent a disgusting chill down my spine. I thought I was going to cry. How come these sorts of guys never listen to what you say?

We made our way into the forest surrounding the ruins, our blades clashing all the while.

“Um! Um! Mister? How come you can fight so well when your level’s so low? From what I can see, it’s not even in the double digits, is it? So how come you’re so strong and fast?”

The sound of our echoing swords rang through the trees. With each skirmish, Nonorick laughed with glee, as though he were merely testing my ability.

“Oh, shut up. There’s more to life than stats, you know!” I shot back.

I suspected as much after I met him the first time around, but I guess he really can tell people’s levels just by looking at them.

Perhaps his skill was related to my Appraise skill in some way. In any case, despite the fact I was trying hard not to give away any information about myself, he had been able to pick out my level with ease.

“Of course I know it’s more complicated than stats equal power,” he said, “but that still doesn’t explain your strength! Are you even human, mister?”

“Afraid so! One hundred percent pure, honest-to-god human!”

Throughout our fight, I was able to get a measure of the boy's abilities.

...I wonder if Appraise works during combat?

Nonorick was trying to work out my power right now. Or rather, he was enjoying the taste. I still had effort to spare on other tasks. However...

STATUS



Nonorick

Lv??

Age ?? • Unknown • Human

HP: ???/???

MP: ???/???

Strength: Unknown

Stamina: Unknown

Vitality: Unknown

Agility: Unknown

Magic: Unknown

Resistance: Unknown

Intrinsic Abilities: Unknown

Skills: Unknown

Status: OK

Just like when I had tried analyzing him the first time around, his stats were completely impenetrable.

“Hey! What are you doing? You can’t peek at a lady’s secrets like that!”

“Why the hell does it say ‘SEX: UNKNOWN’?! You’re a boy, goddammit!”

“Huh? Why do you know that? Aww, I always enjoy the looks on people’s faces when they find out the truth, too...,” he complained, sidestepping my Appraise skill without the slightest bit of difficulty.

“Buuut,” he continued, “if you can take one so easily, then why don’t we try two?”

Nonorick flung my blade up with his pure white sword, then drew from his item pouch a second blade, identical to the first.

“Hrgh.”

“See? You blocked that one, too!”

There was another clang as I materialized the Soul Blade of Beginnings to parry Nonorick’s attack. I was familiar with his capabilities from our last battle, so the second sword didn’t surprise me.

“Hee-hee-hee! This is going to be even more fun than I thought!”

Nonorick licked his lips. As if on cue, a flurry of clashing blades echoed throughout the forest.

Well, I screwed that one up, I thought as I deflected his blows. I was hoping he wouldn’t bring that move out yet. It’s a pain to deal with when there’re so many obstacles about.

To be honest, I still had the edge over him in terms of pure sword skills. I had been in situations far worse than this and had come out unscathed. Even if my stats were much lower compared to the last time we’d fought, I had a lot more experience this time around to make up for it.

“Seriously? That all you got?!”

“Huh?! Who are you, mister? Didn’t we meet for the first time on the street the other day?”

“What if I said *I’ve met you in my dreams*? That too old for a pickup line these days?”

“Then how come... How come you fight just like me?”

...Well, figures he could tell.

It was just as he said. My dual-wielding combat style was based on techniques I had seen Nonorick use in battle—refined on my own time, of course. Through the course of many life-or-death engagements, I’d altered the techniques to suit my own physique, strategies, and moves pool, to make my strikes as efficient as possible. At this point, it was fair to call it a completely new style entirely, but the fact remained that Nonorick’s fighting style served as the foundation to my own. There was no way the boy himself wouldn’t be able to recognize that.

“Who knows? I see no reason to tell you!”

“Aaah! You meanie!”

Our four swords clashed and threw off sparks.

Then we reached the location I had been leading us to at last.

“Rrraaargh!”

“Hup! *Phew!*”

After lightly deflecting a blow with one of my swords to open up some distance, I swung the other in a horizontal arc, with more power than sharpness behind it.

“Awww, you made it to your destination!”

We were in a small clearing between the forest and a tall cliff. Nothing grew here but scraggly weeds. It wasn’t a long distance from the ruins, but still it felt like the journey here had taken forever.

“I suppose that’s all for the warm-up, then. Time to get serious! Ah, but do you mind telling me your name before we do?”

“...It’s Kaito.”

I could have easily chosen not to tell him, but my answer slipped quickly off

my tongue. Perhaps it was because pointing out the similarities in our styles had reminded me of the days I'd spent training and studying our previous battle.

Or maybe I'd told him that out of gratitude, or some misplaced sentimentality. I didn't know the way my mind worked. Either way, it didn't change what I had to do.

"Hmm? Kaito, huh? Then I'll call you Kai! I'll make sure it says that on your collar, too! ♪"

Nonorick licked his lips and grinned.

I supposed I could send him on his way without making him suffer.

"Just shut up and fight. I won't hold back anymore, either," I said.

That instant, I heard Nonorick's foot kick off the ground...

Clang! Clang! Kerrang! Clang! Our blades clashed over and over again with such speed that I didn't even have time to breath. Nonorick's ferocity made it clear those stuffy movements he'd made back in the forest with all those trees around really were just a warm-up.

Now all that remained was to devote myself to battle entirely. Once I did that, a different kind of joy suffused me, one that wasn't quite the same as what I felt when exacting my revenge.

"Kha-hah-hah! Don't you dare go easy on me! I know you're faster than that!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This isn't over yet!"

The blood whirling through my veins grew hotter, hotter. Nonorick was a far cry from the opponents I'd faced who relied only on their stats in their attempts to defeat me; the boy had technique. It was like walking a tightrope, but atop a spider's thread—the slightest error would spell my doom.

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty. With each clash of blows my heart screamed for more. I was so high on adrenaline that I could barely see anything other than my target, and it felt like every nerve in my body had been stripped bare.

"Rgh! That hurt! No one's hurt me in forever! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Me neither! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Crimson splattered across my cheek from Nonorick's arm and shoulder. Each of our faces was streaked with the other's blood, fluid so hot it was practically on fire.

““Ah-ha-ha!””

An upward swing, a downward slash, a sideways sweep, a lunging thrust. With a twist of my wrist, I parried his blade. With a bob of my head, I dodged his swing. Then used my sword to push aside the point aimed right at my heart. The piercing clang of steel meeting steel and the razor-sharp sound of ripping air all served to fuel my excitement further.

It was a close-quarter battle at lightning speed. I moved entirely on instinct, leaving my mind free to admire the scene as though I were simply eating lunch.

This was the way it was meant to be. Both Nonorick and I were cut from the same cloth. We were monsters bred for battle, through and through.

That being said, I put my skills to good use, whereas Nonorick only lost himself to the pleasure. If there was any difference between us, it was that and only that.

I felt a sensation I hadn't experienced since coming to this world the second time. It was as though I were standing on the edge of a blade as thin as piano wire. It was like the air around me was composed of razor blades that were a hair's breadth from my skin.

This was it. This was the feeling. The sensation of my senses and decisions becoming detached from each other. Keep a calm mind and a steady heart? Impossible. That wouldn't be enough, not by a long shot. My mind and heart both needed to be flame. So hot that they threatened to boil away everything else.

I was executing feints and strategies before they even breached my conscious mind.

““Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!””

Our laughter played a melody that turned our bloodstains into roaring flames.

Right now, I was no avenger. Just a killing machine, the same as him. And

each clash of steel brought our dance of death closer and closer to its fatal conclusion.



Right about the same time, Shuria and I were locked in combat with Mr. Rielt.

“Grraaaaargh!”

“Hup!”

“Khh!”

Fegner somehow managed to block both of our swings all by himself. It was a mystery how the pair of short swords he wielded somehow felt as weighty as a greatsword. With one mighty swing, he launched me back.

Taking advantage of that opportunity, Shuria manipulated her armor to swing its sword down at him, but Fegner easily blocked that attack, too.

In that case, how about this?!

“Icepick!”

A ring of icicles as thick as a man’s arm materialized around Fegner from every which way.

“This won’t stop me, you brats!”

But he dodged them all. Not only the decoys on the left and right, but even the ones coming from behind, which should have dealt the killing blow. None of them landed so much as a scratch on him.

“Wind Shot! Wind Blade!”

Fegner’s magical wind blast knocked Shuria’s puppet off its feet. With a swing of his short sword, its blade extended by magic, he sliced the armor in half.

“Aww, that was my favorite suit of armor!”

But that wasn’t all it would take to defeat Shuria.

“You...you’re going to pay for that!”

“Tch!”

In a last-ditch attack, the suit of armor wrapped its arms and legs around

Fegner, locking him in place.

“Minnalis!” shouted Shuria.

“Understood! *Poison Mist!*”

I breathed in as much air as my lungs could take and exhaled a green cloud that enveloped the other two entirely.

“Grh! *Wind Armor! Rising Storm!*”

However, Fegner managed use his “Wind Magic” to free himself from the armor and blow the gas cloud away. After the poison cleared, the top half of the armor fell to the ground, and Fegner sent it flying with a kick.

“Haah...haah... Out of my way, wretched thing!”

“Krrhh!”

“Hh!”

The kick resulted in a huge *Gong!* and the armor sped across the ground toward me. Shuria reacted quickly, commanding the puppet to plunge its sword into the ground to slow its momentum. The weakened armor tore apart as a result, but that allowed me to turn my attention back to Fegner, who was quickly approaching for a follow-up.

“Haah...rgh... Raaargh!”

“Haaaahh!”

Our clashing blades rang out once more.

“Hrh. I must say, you’re a rather tough opponent.”

With one of Fegner’s swords in a normal grip and the other in a reverse grip, it was hard to tell just from the motion of his arms which direction his attacks were heading. On top of that, his seasoned muscle memory left very few openings. The only reason I was able to go toe-to-toe with him at all was because my usual training partner was far stronger.

“Listen, Minnalis. Your most powerful weapon in a battle is your sight. It’s all for nothing if you can’t see your opponent’s attacks coming. Of course, that won’t always mean you’ll be able to dodge them, but you ought to be able to

fight an enemy a few levels higher than you just by going on the defensive.”

I thought back to the time Master had taught me how to pick out incoming attacks in the heat of battle. That was what had allowed me to ignore Fegner’s feints and lures today.

“Puppet Possession: Kitty, Teddy, Miss Metal!”

“Grr, dammit! Who the hell are all these?!”

Shuria’s familiars all descended on Fegner at once. It seemed she had taken back the mana allotted to that suit of armor and put it to use once more.

“Get him!”

“Damn you!”

Yet Fegner still managed to block all of the attacking dolls, as well as the follow-up strike I delivered when he was distracted. He was a truly powerful opponent. If he still had his youth, no doubt we would have lost this fight.

“Haah...haah...hh...ahh...”

“Phew... Oh? What’s this? Tired already?”

Unfortunately for him, his health had left him long ago.

“Y-you children! What did you do to me?!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Surely you already know, don’t you? ...I’ve poisoned you.”

“That’s impossible! We know precisely what fiends like you will stoop to, so we take every possible precaution to avoid employees of the Grond Company being poisoned. That includes me, of course.”

Fegner belted out his protests, but it was clear from the look on his face that the truth was beginning to dawn on him.

“Oh, what a lovely expression you’re making,” said Shuria. “Why don’t you take a look at your status screen if you’re so confident you’re not poisoned?”

“Rgh... What?! This is impossible! What is the meaning of this?!”

As he heeded Shuria’s suggestion, Fegner’s eyes went wide with shock. Then he turned those bloodshot orbs back on us.

“Hee-hee-hee!” Shuria tittered with glee. “It seems we are nearly at the end of that mask of yours!”

Shuria’s expression was the picture of happiness, and I was sure my own face looked very similar.

“Heh-heh-heh. That’s my master for you. Your poison resistance really is as high as Sir Squeaks told him.”

“Hrh! Grh...rrgh! Tell me what you did!” roared Fegner with some difficulty.

“I don’t have to tell you that... Hmm, but all right, I suppose I shall.”

...That would make this all the more humiliating for him, after all.

“Do you know about quicksilver? It is a metal that melts at body temperature, often used as a catalyst in alchemy. My master called it ‘*mercury*.’”

I took out a small vial he had given me and showed off the colorless liquid within.

“I used that mercury to create this: a substance called *dimethylmercury*. We mixed it into the invitation you received.”

“Dimethyl...what? Haah...krh... And so?”

“So it is that very poison that is affecting you now.”

“Don’t make me laugh. Even in a liquid state, it is only a mere mineral. How can a metal be poison?!”

His reasoning was in line with this world’s science. Minerals were not life. Life and non-life could never mix. And without being taken into the body, a poison could not poison anyone.

“That’s why all poisons in this world are made from mana created by humans, creatures, or plants,” Shuria had said when Master first told us.

Personally, I had never heard of a mineral being used as a poison myself, but the substance that Master had created using the Suction Blade proved lethal enough to kill any weak monster, even in tiny quantities.

“The message in that letter was penned in this poison ink. It evaporated upon contact with the air. And then you inhaled that, didn’t you?”

I continued with my explanation while Fegner was still struggling with the idea that a mineral could be toxic.

“The poison...was in the words themselves? A mineral? Preposterous. The concentration must have been extremely low...!”

“It has no taste, no smell, and even an amount so small as to be unnoticeable can utterly destroy you from the inside out. Ah-ha-ha, didn’t you say you’d taken every possible precaution against poisoning?” I asked, with an over-the-top laugh perfectly designed to get under his skin. “So tell me, what precautions do you have against a poison that’s not based on mana?”

“...Krh.”

Fegner stiffened his expression at my words, which only made me smile wider.

“Grh... You dishonorable...brat...”

“Hah. So even an employee of the Grond Company knows what honor is. You really are a faker, you know that? Did you really think nobody else would ever resort to dirty tactics?”

“Haah...haahh... Khh...khaah...”

The battle was plainly over once the poison began to take effect. Fegner was already coughing up clots of blood and wiping them from his mouth. We halted our attack and stayed on the defensive, watching him grow weaker and weaker with each passing minute. It was a truly enjoyable show, being able to see the look of confusion and pain spreading across his face.

But soon it would be time for that show to end.

“Ghah! *Cough! Cough!*”

Fegner’s coughing fit grew even stronger, and he collapsed to his knees.

“Aw, is that it already?” asked Shuria. “I wanted to see you hold out a little longer.”

The suit of armor’s metal plates clattered as it lowered its sword. Shuria had unleashed a replacement for the first to fight alongside her three familiars.

“Would you mind leaving the finishing touches to me, Shuria?”

She thought for a moment before reluctantly responding, “...You will owe me one, you know? A big one!”

“Thank you, Shuria.”

I slowly approached Fegner.

“Grh... Don’t look at me like that!”

“Heh-heh. You cannot even touch me now.”

Fegner lashed out with a swing as I got closer, but my parry tore the sword from his hand. It twirled through the air before landing point-first in the dirt a short distance away.

“Haah...haah... Curses...”

“Ah, now we have finally switched positions from when we first met,” I said.

When first we’d crossed paths, he’d looked down on us with pity.

Even though he knew nothing of our lives.

He acted as though he knew it all.

Fegner had tossed down his unsolicited words and deeds from on high in a vain attempt to preserve his perfect self-image.

Those words were empty, hypocritical, mocking.

“...You passed yourself off as a good man, but you never shied away from doing evil. It makes me feel sick to my stomach, truly, your shoddy imitation of other people.”

Either because of the truth of my words, or simply because he lacked the strength to keep up the act any longer, the strength drained from Fegner’s face.

“Oh, shut up, you two... After all...you are the same, are you not?”

Even his speech and mannerisms had returned to the way they were before.

Ah, truly...his mimicry is rotten to the core.

Perhaps the years had taken their toll on his mind, or he had simply grown so used to his skin that it had tainted him. Or maybe everything was one great big

lie.

But he was a fake. Not even one good enough to fool anybody.

His anger, his rough speech, everything was an act.

“...You’ve really annoyed us, you know? That’s why we’ve been calling you a sham,” I said, my voice as still, dark, and cold as a grave. “You’re not the same as us, not even close. So don’t start telling us what we are.”

“Graaah! Gh...ghaah!”

I stepped on Fegner’s hand hard enough to crush the bones within.

“What do you and me even share in common? You pretended to get angry, when you really couldn’t care less what happened to your associates, could you? In fact, and I don’t have the slightest idea why, *you were happy.*”

“Grrhhhh?!”

I twisted my foot, pressing his shattered hand into the ground.

“You told us we’d be better off forgetting about our vengeance. But you would never be able to say that if you had felt the pain we’ve experienced. If you can say it despite all that, then you can never call yourself the same as us.”

Vomiting blood at the pain in his hand and the torturous agony of the poison racking his body, Fegner looked up at me with vacant eyes.

“Listen well, Mr. Rielt. I have a question for you.”

“A...quest...ion...?”

“Yes, that’s right. You came here to us with a great sum of money, didn’t you? If we kill you here, and dispose of the body, what do you suppose will happen to your reputation back in town?”

“...W-well...”

The man’s brain already seemed to be failing him, but after a short moment, he hit upon the answer, and his eyes, narrowed in pain, suddenly shot wide.

“Yes, that’s absolutely right. You know what they’ll say? *He betrayed his employer as soon as things started looking bad and ran off with the money.*”

“No... *Cough, cough!* Please...anything but that...!”

At long last, Fegner had showed us his true face, blood spewing from his mouth.

“Oh, that’s nice. It seems you really do care about that.”

If he hadn’t, I wasn’t sure where I could have taken things from here.

“Hurgh...hu...rgh... *Cough!*”

At this last eruption of blood, the greatest so far, Fegner dropped his other sword and fell over onto his side. Then he shouted, as though he couldn’t feel the pain of death at all:

“I’ll lose everything again! *Cough! Cough!* It’ll all be gone!”

“Heh-heh-heh. We’re finally at the end, aren’t we?”

Fegner’s mask of virtue.

Behind that, his mask of anger, brimming with human emotion.

And beneath that, something else. Something we didn’t yet know.

“Now, show us,” I said. “Show us what you’re like beneath all those coats of paint. Show us what’s behind those papier-mâché masks of yours. What is your wish, deep down?”

“Grhhhhh... No... I’m going...back to town...”

The poison had progressed so far at this point that he was growing delirious. Fegner turned over onto his belly and began crawling away, mumbling nonsense.

“Haah...haah... The... The reason I lived...the meaning of my life... It was almost here... To make the Grond Company...grow... That is all...I needed...” He gasped for breath as though drowning in the riverbed. “No... I almost bested him...my brother... Born just a few cursed seconds earlier... So why...?”

“ ... ”

“I don’t want...to be empty... I don’t want...”

No doubt he could no longer tell what was happening around him. In his final

moments, his mind all but gone, he used his last few words to curse the meaninglessness of it all.

“I just wanted...to be given a purpose in life...and I finally had one...”

With every last one of his layers stripped away, the only thing that remained of the man was a dead, hollow tree.

“Oh, now I see. There was nothing behind those masks at all. You were just a corpse covered in layers you stole from other people.”

And so I laughed.

“Well, that’s good. I wonder how many people out there you’ve given a dark flame to like ours? You, on the other hand, are nothing but a clown on the outside, and a third-rate copy on the inside.”

“Argh...ugh...”

Though the light in the dying old man’s eyes had already gone out, I am certain that he still heard my final words to him: *“What a waste.”*

And the stream of tears that fell from those lifeless eyes was surely real as well.

So as he breathed his last at my feet, I put my hands together and prayed. Prayed to the goddess I now knew to be real.

“...Ahh, I am glad I could see those tears of yours in the end. I pray that in the afterlife, you are punished for each and every tear you caused.”

I wished with all my heart that it would come to pass.

“Hiyah! Haah! Haah! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hup! Rah! Take this!”

The air in the clearing was filled with the pleasant rings of clashing steel. How many times had our blades crossed in that short span of time? I could almost feel the rust falling from my arms as I polished my long-shelved fencing prowess. While my top-tier Finesse score still allowed me to leverage the full power of my stats, my sword skills themselves had grown stagnant from disuse. It was all because I wasn’t risking life and limb every day anymore.

““Hrh!””

Suddenly, we clashed one final time, a meeting of blades so powerful the very sound could level trees. The two of us flew backward, scraping against the ground, and faced off across the distance.

“Aww, I thought I was pretty good with a sword,” said Nonorick. “But you seem even better than me.”

Indeed, while neither of us had been able to land a fatal blow, the wounds I had succeeded in inflicting on the boy were clearly deeper and of greater number than the cuts he had landed on me.

“That’s because I’ve fought many tough battles, and you haven’t,” I replied.

The four years of my first life had been no cakewalk. I had fought in struggles the likes of which nobody in this world had ever seen and *wouldn’t* see until the war with evil broke out for real. Those days spent fighting on the edge had honed my Finesse score to SSS, and my Reaction Time to SS. Those, combined with the skills for swordplay I had built upon a river of blood, created an aptitude for combat that Nonorick simply could not compete with, even though he was almost certainly better in terms of raw stats.

“Also, you’re way too protective of your face.”

“Excuse me, have you *seen* how cute it is? I can’t believe you’d try to ruin such a perfect smile, Kai!”

“Shut up. Also, I told you that nickname creeps me out. Stop it.”

“Never! Hee-hee-hee! Well, I’ve had my fun, so how about we get serious?”

A chill descended from the air as Nonorick advanced to another level. His ferocious heat took on a deeper hue, as though a shadow had passed over the clearing.

“If two swords aren’t enough, then how about four?”

Nonorick turned the two swords in his hands point-down and stabbed them into the ground. He loosened the magic pouch around his waist and produced another two blades, identical in every way to the first pair.

Hrh! Here it comes!

Then all four swords, the two in the ground and the two in his hands, levitated into the air.

“Wanna give up now, while you still can? Here I come!”

“Tch!”

The four white swords flew in a line straight at me. I fended them off one after the other with my own two.

Dammit, I'd hoped to kill him before we got this far. I guess that wasn't in the cards.

The levitating swords weren't nearly as fast or powerful as when Nonorick was wielding them himself, but their sheer number had me on the defensive.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wow, you're not dead yet! You must have seen me fight before, right? Otherwise, there's no way you'd be able to respond to my skill so quickly!”

“I ain't tellin' you nothin'!” I taunted.

“Grr. Still giving me the silent treatment, huh? Oh well, I'll just get it out of you on the bed later! 🎵”

There was no opportunity for me to disengage. I parried blade after blade, careful not to let any of them circle behind me. I was okay, for now, but things were only going to get worse.

I have to beat him before he adds any more... Hrk?!

While I distracted myself with unnecessary thoughts, two more swords came flying in, hidden in the shadow of the one I'd just deflected to catch me off guard. I parried one of them, but not the other, and it left a shallow gash on my collarbone near my neck, too deep to be called a mere scratch.

“Hmmm... Looks like even another two blades aren't able to scare you,” Nonorick said. “But I liked the look on your face just now. It was quite sexy, wouldn't you say?”

Nonorick licked my splattered blood off his lips.

Going from four to six didn't necessarily mean his combat ability had gone up

50 percent. The more swords he added into the mix, the slower they moved, and he also had to be careful not to let them collide with each other, which restricted their range of movement. Despite that, I was at my limit. *Now* I was fighting on the edge. If I didn't go on the offensive, even I wouldn't last too much longer.

Grr, am I actually in danger here...? Hrk!

There was one way I could make it out alive. A secret technique that Nonorick had satisfied the conditions for. But I couldn't use it yet. It was meant for Grond and Grond alone.

The end is in sight. Just a bit more...

Nonorick could only manifest six swords without using his skill. That meant that next...

"Okay then," he said. "In that case, I'll add six more, okay? ...*Scatter, tear, shred to ribbons...*"

He threw a further six white swords onto the floor before him. Then he turned out his pouch, from which fell a mountain of white knives, like miniature versions of the swords. They all rose into the air and flew about, forming a cloud of over a hundred blades circling around me.

"...White Ramble."

The twelve white swords rose into the air and swooped down upon me in concert, and the hundred knives all turned to shoot inward.

"Over Limit!"

Without a moment to spare, I drew the Nephrite Blade of Verdure from my hip, healing the wound to my collar while unleashing the very same secret technique I had used against Eumis. Right at that moment, the dozen blades and countless knives reached me.

There was not even a single pause in that cacophony of metal. It roared like an unruly beast, growing faster by the second, seeking to drown out all the noise that came before it.

Rgh. This guy's a real pain!

I didn't know the particulars of Nonorick's skill, White Ramble. It was most likely an intrinsic ability or some sort of Misc. spell that granted telekinetic powers. What I did know was that it was a technique Nonorick only used when he got serious. He could manipulate the twelve swords freely while tossing the smaller swords like throwing knives.

Move my neck right and take care of those two knives with my fists. Then slash up from the right and sharply back down, taking out those three knives and two swords. Then take three steps backward and to the left...

My body was at last in sync with the speed of my mind. I could execute all the moves I wanted to.

"Huh! Good work, keep it up!" Nonorick grinned. "How long can you hold out, I wonder?"

"Shut up!" I replied.

I proceeded with Over Limit as carefully as I could. With my current mana cap, I could only use this technique for five minutes at most.

"Oh, getting tired already?" Nonorick jeered. "Some of the blades are getting through to you, you know."

"Hrk! Khh! Tch!"

The tiny little cuts on my skin burned. The adrenaline flooded my brain, blocking out the pain and sharpening only my battle senses.

Focus, focus, focus. All the nerves in my body were concentrated on swinging my swords as precisely as I could.

...Rgh! Here it is!

Then I felt the feedback through my sword I'd been waiting for at last. Nonorick was still pretending he had the advantage, but he hadn't yet made a move to finish me off.

"Ha-ha. Hey, I've got something I want to say to you," I said.

"Hmm? What's this? Have you changed your mind about submitting to me?"

...That meant that I could finish this without resorting to my *other* secret

technique.

The pieces were all in play. What I'd just felt was my reward for running over the razor's edge barefoot this whole time. The perfect ending for someone like me, who chose vengeance over personal safety.

"It was all thanks to the techniques I stole off you, and because I lost to you once before, that I survived this world the first time around. Perhaps this doesn't make much sense, but I want to express my gratitude. So..."

"Huh?"

"I'll make this quick."

As I swung my sword, it was accompanied by the sound of breaking metal. That was the sound of my carefully laid plan coming to fruition.

It was the sound of one of Nonorick's blades shattering in two.

"...Hrh!"

A second, and a third, and a fourth clang followed. Throughout the fight, I had been blocking the swords at *exactly the same point* each time, so unlike with my indestructible soul blades, the accumulated damage had eventually taken its toll on the swords' structural integrity.

"No way!"

"Yes way, I'm afraid!"

While I was saying that, I shattered another two of Nonorick's white swords, and then one more with a spinning heel drop. My opponent was flabbergasted that he hadn't been able to recall his weapons in time.

"Krh!"

"Too slow!" I yelled. The smaller knives flew toward me, but I had no fear of an attack that put quantity over quality. Instead, I used the knives as midair footholds in order to reach three of the white swords that hovered overhead. I held my swords in a reverse grip and crossed my arms, swinging them back out like a pair of scissors and snapping the three blades in half.

"Die!" Nonorick yelled.

“Not with attacks like that, I won’t.”

His knives attacked me from all directions as I landed, but I swept them all away with my soul blades before leaping forward, rapidly bearing down on him.

“Four swords left,” I declared. “Not enough to stop me from severing your head right now!”

I slipped free from the storm of knives, running in a straight line toward Nonorick. In response, he fired two of the swords forward to intercept me.

“I don’t think so!”

Then the last two came flying. With all of Nonorick’s focus behind them, I was unable to dodge the swings, with one slashing my arm and another cutting a notch out of my ear.

“That hurt! But now, you’re all out!” I yelled.

As I healed the arm wound with the Nephrite Blade of Verdure, I let my two soul blades hang in the air and grabbed the white swords by the grips, swinging them down and smashing both of them against the earth.

“Aww, come on! Just let me kill you, dummy!”

“You’re the only dummy here, you freakazoid!”

I scooped up my soul blades a split second before they hit the floor, and, still keeping low to the ground, ran toward Nonorick. The boy seemed to neither wait nor run, instead recalling his last remaining pair of swords back into his hands. The meeting of our blades let out a sharp ring unlike any I’d heard before.

“Tch. Guess those two won’t break so easily.”

“Of course not! These two are special!”

These were the two he had first conjured, back when he had been fighting with only a pair of blades. Though they looked identical to their disposable counterparts, they were far stronger; clearly not so brittle that they would break over the course of a single battle.

But now they were the only weapons he had left. Only one more move from

me and it would be checkmate. I had to make sure I got the timing perfect.

“Hrh!”

“Haaaaaaah!”

We recommenced our dual-wielding showdown once more. It was clear from the look on Nonorick’s face that he was all out of tricks. He fought ferociously, like a cornered animal, pushing his blades into any opening he could create. With Over Limit on my side, however, Nonorick’s raw swordplay was no match for mine. I closed in on him, dodging swords and knives alike.

“Haagh!”

“Krhhhh!”

Without numbers on Nonorick’s side, I was free to slash at his neck. He blocked it by a hair’s breadth but was unable to hold out against my strength as I sent him flying backward.

“Rgh!”

Feeling this was the moment, I leaped forward after the flying boy.

At that moment, I noticed he was smiling.

“...Give chase.”

This was Nonorick’s true last resort, the one he had been hiding. I had fallen for it spectacularly the first time. If you didn’t know it was coming, it was impossible to deal with.

“Huh?! Why?!”

“Did you think you were the only one with invisible weapons, Nonorick?!”

This time, the look of surprise on his face was genuine. The sound coming from my back was proof that even his very last ploy had failed him. A sound where there was absolutely nothing to see, save for a few meager sparks.

That was the sound of Nonorick’s final blade, cloaked in invisibility, colliding with a solid barrier of mana I had created using the “Air Step” skill.

With its speed killed, the unseen blade rematerialized and fell to the ground. That had been Nonorick’s last facedown card. The reason Nonorick used swords

of all the same color was probably to avoid it being conspicuous if one of them went missing like this.

However, the ace up Nonorick's sleeve was no threat to me, because I already knew about it from the first time we fought.

A trap the enemy sees coming is no trap at all.

"It's like you said. I did cheat a little bit. Sorry, but your facedown card was faceup this whole time."

"Khh!"

Kicking off the Air Step platform, I pushed myself even harder ahead. There was no means for Nonorick to stop my advance now. As his face froze in shock, I swung the Soul Blade of Beginnings and sliced his throat.

I felt every cell in his neck yield to my blade. There was a silent moment where it felt like time stood still, broken by the clatter of Nonorick's swords as they fell to the ground, bereft of their puppeteer.

The white sword in Nonorick's hand, too, fell from his slackened grip.

"...Is this how it feels, I wonder? To surpass your master?" I muttered. "...I guess not, since I didn't exactly fight fair. It doesn't really feel satisfying at all."



“ ... ”

Nonorick still stared at me, the light in his eyes rapidly receding. Soon, even that dim glow faded, and Nonorick, the boy who taught me the blade, expired.

“...Figures,” I said to that empty place. “Killing you brings me no joy at all.”

I turned and left, making my way back to the others.

“*Sigh.* I guess Fegner is dead already. I never tried poisoning someone with organomercurials the first time, but they’re quite effective and bypass most resistances. Just my luck I’d miss out on seeing it. Isn’t that just my life to a T? Urgh, I really wanted to kill Fegner myself, too.”

Thinking back to when I last saw him, and factoring in how fast I knew the poison acted, I realized I probably wasn’t seeing him alive again. Different toxins worked at different speeds, but I had worked with poisons of similar strength to this before.

It was looking unlikely I would even make it back. I just couldn’t be bothered. What was the point?

“Oh, here it comes. MP drunkenness always makes me feel depressed. Oh Goddd, I just want to go home and sleeeeeep...”

I still had untreated wounds, but healing them just felt like too much effort. I wasn’t going to die or anything, so who cared? I just needed to suck it up and keep walking.

The MP potion I downed tasted a little more bitter than usual and brought a lively taste to my weary mouth. The night was still young, and the sun would not rise for many hours yet.



Two weeks had passed since I’d last heard from Fegner. The adventurers from the guild cleared the roads without incident, and life in the town of Dartras returned to normal.

However, the Grond Company’s fortunes failed to improve, and even now the number of imports and exports to and from the town was dismally low. Most likely, shipping would not reach usual levels until it was ascertained that the

roads were safe again. After all, no one in this city needed to trade *that* badly.

I also learned that the news of the recast had been false intelligence, though by now it no longer mattered. I had lost my mountain of cash purchasing the goods necessary to fulfill my contracts. The subsidy was nothing now but a hypothetical nested within another hypothetical.

As for Fegner, I could come to no other conclusion than that he had taken the money and fled this rapidly sinking ship. As much as I was curious to know where he had gone, I lacked the resources to go after him at the moment.

“Mr. Grond, the government has completed its investigation,” reported my employee. “The team is on their way back to the capital now.”

“...I see. Very well. Resume normal business operations.”

Of course, with our company hemorrhaging stock and all stores closed, there was no such thing as “normal operations” for us anymore. Still, what else was I to say?

“Understood, sir.”

The employee, however, didn’t complain and quietly left the room.

Those crown lapdogs didn’t even show their faces to me. Am I not worthy of consultation?

I clenched my fists in anger and sipped some green tea to calm my nerves.

“Grr, it’s too strong. All I can taste is bitterness.”

I screwed up my face in disgust. I knew green tea took more care to brew, but it was difficult for me to adapt as someone only used to making the black tea of the kingdom. Fegner had been able to balance the tastes carefully because he had built up experience wandering from country to country. But he was no longer here to assist me.

“...Curse you, Fegner. Have you forgotten it was *my* father who took you in?!”

During my break, the sentiments I had cast aside to focus on my work came flooding back. I knew I couldn’t allow myself to become distracted, yet in my anger, I threw my teacup, and it shattered, dripping its bitter contents down my wall.

My business in this town was finished. I had no hopes of coming back now. I had paid out all my coppers and silvers first so as to concentrate my remaining wealth into as few coins as possible.

Those nosy bureaucrats from the capital were finally gone, and they had not a shred of evidence to show for their meddling. They could search all they liked, but they'd find no proof of misdeeds, because there hadn't been any. My company had been lying idle this entire time.

All that was left for me to do was to take what little money I had left and skip town.

"...The imperial capital... Grr, I'll have to start all over from scratch. At least the empire prizes ability over bloodlines. My finances should help me there, even as a newcomer. I'll have to find a man on the inside to replace the princess, along with someone to train the private soldiers I was planning on developing now that Fegner was gone."

I had lost a lot, and all my plans were up in smoke. Still, I had means that were outside the reach of the many.

Money, money, money.

It was all that satisfied me. The only thing that justified my existence.

"How ironic it is that Fegner's betrayal has only strengthened my convictions."

My words came almost unbidden.

Fegner had taken my money and ran. That was something he would only do if money had power over him. Therefore, I was right. Money could not lose its value. It was simply impossible.

"I suppose I shall hire a new staff of slaves when I start over in the empire," I mused. I felt I had grown too reliant, too trusting of my current staff, employees I had inherited from my father rather than bought with my own finances. I needed people who would obey my orders, and the empire's many slaves were just begging to be bought.

"Hmm, instead of saving money by turning orphans into soldiers, perhaps it

would be better to use slaves after all.”

My plan had been to drive an orphanage to ruin, take their children, and train them in combat to do my dirty work. Fegner had advised me to do it that way rather than resort to using slaves. It would be easier to instill in them the values I wanted while they were still young, he had claimed. The brainwashing would be more effective, rendering them more loyal and hardworking than slaves, while also costing far less to acquire.

His logic had persuaded me at the time, but thinking about it now, it was a reckless idea.

“But now all the work I have done to that end is wasted. I shall have to start over.”

I’d planned on undermining the orphanage so the children would be without a place to go. I had even procured a supply of the highly addictive Lemonade at Fegner’s suggestion, to compensate for the effects of the brainwashing and the children’s intrinsic weakness. But now, the whole thing was up in smoke.

On top of that, I had even given thought to where I would keep my private army, a place not far from the town where construction would go unnoticed. I could have started building it if I had just a little more cash on hand, but as it happened, I had laid the groundwork for nothing.

What a waste of money. I guess gold really is the only thing you can trust.

I sighed and looked out the window. Off in the distance stood the imperial capital. Once all the paperwork was dispensed with, all that remained would be to pack up my gold and head there by carriage. There was little sense in remaining here, where I couldn’t spend my money.

“ ... ”

Down in the streets, people went about their usual lives. In the end, there just hadn’t been enough evidence to narrow down who it was that had meddled in my affairs, nor which company had been backing them. Just thinking about it made my blood boil. In the worst case, I could imagine Nonorick betraying me. After all, why else would he have gone missing at such a crucial stage? It was he, too, who had claimed to have information on the true culprit. There was

plenty of reason to suggest he had cut a deal with some other company in order to stab me in the back.

And if that were the case, then just how long had he been planning this?

Or perhaps it was Fegner, the man who brought false news of the recast in the first place...

“Those weaseling serpents... First thing I’ll do when I get back on my feet is crush the lot of them.”

I gripped my pen so hard it tore the paper.

I was leaving this town. And when next I returned, the Grond Company would be large enough to swallow Dartras whole. Then I would drain it dry of everything it had.

“Everyone who meddled in my business. Everyone who looked down on me. They’re all guilty of the same crime. I’ll see them rot in hell for this!”

The rest of my work went quickly as I dreamed of what that day held in store.

Three hours later, I was ready to depart. Somehow, I had managed to find an escort that would take my coin.

My first task was to deliver the Leafstone Blade to curry favor with the imperial nobility. My hand instinctively went to the small magic pouch at my waist. Inside it were fifty platinum pieces, a veritable fortune I had hidden away for circumstances like these. This was not money my father had given me with the business, but a fortune I had earned on my own.

Platinum pieces were made of a material called mithril, which was naturally resistant to magical effects. Even tucked away within my magic pouch, there was more than enough of it to grant me resistance to magical effects and poisons.

At this moment, however, they offered me something far more valuable.

“At last, this feeling again, it warms my heart...”

That pouch was a symbol of value, and it granted me solace. The coins felt cold to the touch, and they shone so brightly that nobody could even approach. Their touch soothed my heart like the finest honey.

“I can do it. Everything will be all right as long as I have money...”

I closed the pouch and placed it back inside my pocket, but even through my clothes I held on tightly to it.

“Well, then. Have a nice trip, sir.”

“...”

Those words sounded almost sarcastic as I bundled myself into the carriage and left town under cover of darkness. I took with me only the bare necessities; a mercenary escort and a handful of employees, those who hadn’t—couldn’t—leave the Grond Company even after everything that had transpired. People who understood that my company had been propping them up for so long that they would have nothing left in Dartras once I was gone.

Many had left my company because of this, but if people found out who their previous employer was, they’d never find work in this town again. That was how badly my name had been run into the mud. My reputation was so bad that I hadn’t even been able to charter a proper escort of adventurers through the guild.

“Well, even if that weren’t the case, I would want mercenaries with me on this one.”

Sellswords were sellswords precisely because they couldn’t find any other line of work. They were trapped. They would starve if they broke their contracts and lost what little confidence they had inspired. As such, they would show me far more loyalty than any adventurer would, so long as I could line their pockets.

The taxes on leaving the country are nothing to sneeze at, either.

There was a heavy tax on all wealth that left the town. As it was, I stood to lose much of my fortune if I didn’t swindle my way out of it. I couldn’t bend the law with business transactions that left a paper trail, but it would all be smooth sailing once I made it to the empire.

And so, with the help of a gatekeeper I had bribed the previous day, we left town without being seen. I could expect that more than a few of the companies who thought I had stolen from them would be after my blood.

“Curses, to think that I of all people would be forced to skip town at night. Hey, coachman! Can’t you do something about this blasted shaking?!”

“What do you want me to do, go out and flatten the road?” the driver shot back. “There’s nothing I can do about it. These old trails haven’t been maintained for years.”

The carriage was so gaudy that even a noble would be hard-pressed to afford it. It made for a strange sight traveling along the old, disused highway. Fortunately, it wouldn’t be like this the whole way to the empire, but it was going to be quite a bumpy ride until we got onto roads better preserved.

“Or would you rather I took a different route?”

“Tch. Never mind. Just keep an eye out.”

I felt like the driver’s calm tone was mocking me.

I would have found somebody a little more competent if I had time...

Unfortunately, I wasn’t in a position to be picky about who I employed at the moment. Even mercenaries were hard to come by. While they were indeed desperate for work and would do anything for cash, that only made them all the more cautious over which jobs they accepted. Assuming they were aware of the rumors surrounding my company, they wouldn’t take a job from me unless they had a compelling reason to accept it. It was only through my connections with a mob boss in the slums that I was able to procure an escort at all. I had offered that man my entire office building, along with the land it stood on, in exchange for the goods I needed to fulfill my contracts. And in that contract was a clause stipulating that he would help in providing an escort when the time came for me to leave town.

I definitely feel a lot safer with professional guards at my side instead of just my employees and servants...but there’s something not quite right about those three.

My escort team was composed of one man and two women. The man, who seemed to be the leader of the group, was currently acting as my coachman, while the two women remained in the carriages behind.

A plain-looking gentleman, a Lagonid beastfolk, and a dark-skinned young girl.

The three of them struck me as a little young, but there was something else about them that bothered me, something I couldn't put my finger on. Perhaps I was simply jumping at shadows due to all that had transpired over the last few weeks.

Oh well. A few days' travel, and I'll be out of the kingdom for good.

News of my company's purported deeds had undoubtedly spread to the empire, too, but it was unlikely that anyone there knew my face. A simple change of name ought to be enough to escape suspicion. Once I did that, I would be able to charter a proper escort from the Adventurers Guild in the empire.

I peered out through the window behind me at the three other carriages trailing behind us before facing forward again and crossing my arms. At the head of our convoy was the carriage in which I was sitting, and behind that were two wagons filled with pouches containing all the money and precious gemstones I had cobbled together, while in the rearmost carriage sat my servants and employees.

I closed my eyes in an attempt to calm myself. The night was getting on now, yet I was so tense I felt no exhaustion at all. And even if I'd wanted to sleep, the rocking of the carriage would have made it impossible to nod off.

...? What's that sweet scent?

Just then, a strange odor tickled my nostrils, like a field of flowers. Upon inhaling, I was suddenly overcome with the most irresistible drowsiness. Alarm bells blared in my head as the delicate fragrance carried me off to sleep.

"Huh. Seems like you realized what was happening," came a voice.

"What have...you...?"

I immediately clasped the pouch around my neck, but soon even my protesting mind was forced into slumber. The last thing I saw between my heavy eyelids was the smiling face of the coachman, peering back at me through the window.

"Well, no matter," I heard him say, as the last of my consciousness slipped from the precipice. "It's too late for you now."



“That’s platinum for you. I guess we don’t have much time before Minnalis’s poison wears off.”

In this world at least, platinum was an alloy of mithril and gold. Merely by forging about ten coins’ worth into a metal suit of armor, you could create a level of poison resistance on par with a basic antidote potion. The fact that Grond, an ordinary merchant with no particular strength of constitution, had managed to stay awake for even a moment, was testament to the effects of the platinum coins he kept within his pouch.

“...That’s right, hold it tight. It’s your precious treasure.”

I’ll let you cling to it a little longer. Just don’t die on me yet. You’ve still got to feel the burning despair I have planned for you. We’re not over yet. Not by a long shot.

“I guess it’s time to put the plan into action.”

We didn’t have much time. Time was of the essence. I pulled over and disembarked from the carriage. Minnalis and Shuria had already stabbed their drivers in the back of the neck, as planned, bringing their carriages to a halt.

“Be free, horses! Return to nature, or to town, or whatever!”

““Breheheheeee!””

I released their harnesses, and the horses disappeared into the forest. Now all that remained were the pouches stuffed full of Grond’s goods and assets. I inserted both carriages whole into the Squirrel’s Blade of Holding before heading over to the final wagon where Grond’s employees were waiting.

“Minnalis, Shuria, have you thrown the coachman onto the roof rack?”

“Yes, Master.”

“All done, Kaito!”

“Nice. In that case, let’s get moving.”

I climbed up into the empty driver’s seat. Minnalis and Shuria went around to the back, but there they encountered a problem.

“Hey, no running away!” shouted Shuria.

“Higyaaagh!”

“We’re pressed for time enough as it is,” said Minnalis, “so could you please refrain from slowing us down even further?”

“S-stop! Please stop! Gaaaagh!”

A pair of passengers had tried to make a break for it, but Minnalis and Shuria forced them back inside, breaking a few wrists and ankles in the process.

“Come on, you two, settle down.”

“Okay, Master.”

“Yes, Kaito.”

They sure had become good at answering me, if nothing else. And see? Now there was blood all over the carriage! I knew we weren’t going to keep it, but still, what a mess.

...Not that I was in any position to talk.

“Get back inside!”

“Pwah?!”

The carriage was a standard covered wagon; there was nowhere to escape from but the front or back. After failing to get past Shuria and Minnalis, some of them tried the other path, only to realize their error all too swiftly.

“Oh, damn. I don’t know my own strength sometimes.”

I thought a quick karate chop to the face would slow the man down, but his nose exploded into a fountain of blood. Now there were more stains than ever.

“Why can’t you people just stay calm?”

We were on the edge, barely able to keep our excitement under wraps. It was hardly a surprise that we couldn’t judge our strength correctly.

“Right, let’s be off,” I said.

“Yes, let’s,” replied Minnalis. “Off we go!” added Shuria.

I snapped the reins, and we departed, leaving the carriage containing the

sleeping Grond behind. I felt like the Pied Piper, leading away the children of Hamelin as revenge for the town's dishonesty. In my case, the children were these employees, and Grond their parent, though I doubted Grond really felt that much attachment to these people. If there was an analog to the children in this story, it would be those two carriages full of his money.

"Let's see," I said. "I may not have a flute, but I can hum a little tune, perhaps."

What song would be best to sing at a time like this? Whatever. I'll just make something up. It's not particularly important.

"Hmm, hm-hmm, hm-hmm!"

My humming, along with the sound of the wagon's wheels, echoed down the long, dark stretch of road.

"Welcome to the stage we have prepared for you."

I halted the carriage a little farther up the old highway and released the horses into the wild. Then I unloaded our wretched passengers and put the whole carriage away inside the Squirrel's Blade. After following a path we had cleverly disguised as an animal trail, we arrived at the location we had worked so hard to prepare.

"Or, hmm. Perhaps it's too early to welcome you, since it's not exactly finished yet."

We had devised this stage with the purpose of humiliating Grond. It stood in the very location where that loathsome "school" was yet to be built. There was a little bit of open space, but not as much as there would have been after Grond got his hands on it, and thanks to the massive hole we'd dug, there wasn't much room for us and the thirty or so people we'd brought with us.

The finished hole now sported wooden board over the top. Considering it was to be the scene of Grond's glorious execution, the whole place looked a little dreary. Perhaps that was apt, considering the circumstances, but I would have preferred a little bit of pizzazz. The fact we were exacting our vengeance didn't mean we couldn't liven up the place a little.

"Wh-why have you brought us here? What do you want?"

“Hmm?”

An older woman stepped forward from the crowd. I seemed to recall she was the head maid, a woman equal in status to Fegner, though now she was wearing her traveling clothes and didn't look quite like I remembered her. Given her stern appearance, I presumed she was aware of precisely what this place meant.

“What do I want? Hmm, well, firstly, I'd like to redecorate this place. It's a little drab, don't you think?” I seated myself down on a largish boulder and crossed my legs. “Secondly, I want Grond to run around for a bit in panicked terror so that he can feel as much despair as possible. And last, but not least...”

My lips involuntarily turned up into a smile.

“I want each of you to die a hopeless death.”

“Eek!” “Gyeeaaagh!” “Ahh, ahhh, ahhhh!”

My darkest impulses came flooding out. But it wasn't because I was ready to fight; I was simply letting out a little of the emotion I'd been holding back this whole time—all the hate I had been trying so hard to conceal.

“Oh, wow, fainting already?” remarked Shuria.

“Well, it's no surprise these stuck-up city folk can't handle *real* terror,” added Minnalis. “I'm sorry, but you mustn't fall asleep yet!”

“Gyagh!” “Hgh?!”

Minnalis broke the fainters' fingers one by one until they reawakened.

“Now then, we haven't got all night,” I declared. “Step forward when I call your name.”

“And please listen to us this time. We'd rather not hurt you if we don't have to,” added Minnalis with a light chuckle.

“Ready? Here we go. O'Rowly, Ledia, Ardron, Sivy, Bodie, Jud, Monica...”

It was the list of names I'd committed to memory in that burning building, as if etching it into my very heart with a knife. The worthless scum who'd drugged kids with Lemonade. Each name fell like a curse from my lips. Driven by

Minnalis's threats, a new person stepped forward with each new name, one by one, until the list was complete. Twelve names in total. Of course, I used my Appraise skill to make sure they weren't lying. Some of them I even recognized from my first time around.

"Okay. The rest of you are free to go. You can stay here if you want or go back to town. Just don't get in the way. These twelve are the only ones I have business with."

"Huh?" "Uh, wha...?"

I could sense the confusion of the people whose names hadn't been called. Honestly, I couldn't care less about them. They could watch the show if it pleased them.

"As for the rest of you...how about you kneel for starters?"

It didn't matter if they didn't understand what I was saying at first, because Minnalis, Shuria, and I jumped into action before they could move.

"Hgyaaaagh?!" "Aaaarghhh!" "Gaaaah! The...the pain!"

Our throwing knives stripped the servants of their feet.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! You guys make me laugh! So weak to just a little suffering!"

I was feeling it. It was almost enough to make me forget the children's screams.

"E-eeeek!" "S-save me! Save me!" "Aaaghh!"

About half of the people who hadn't been chosen ran off into the woods at the sight of blood, while the rest just stood and stared in shock.

"My, how undisciplined they are," noted Minnalis.

"It's no surprise," answered Shuria. "In all likelihood, they've spent their entire lives strutting around town, free of hardships. That's the only reason they'd run away from such a teeny-tiny bit of blood like this."

My partners in crime seemed even more fed up than usual. I couldn't say I blamed them, though.

"Hey, no chatting, you two. We've got to start decorating."

“Quite right, Master. Let’s get to work, then.”

“Busy, busy, busy!”

We tied together the scumbags’ legs with rope and hung them from the boughs of a tree just opposite the hole. Within minutes, everything was ready for the finishing touches.

“What are you planning to do with us?!” the old maid shouted with a fiery glare.

“Oh, you’re quite stubborn, aren’t you?” I shot back. “With age comes wisdom, I suppose.”

It mustn’t have been terribly pleasant to have your feet lopped off and get hung upside down. The fact that the head maid had only broken out in a cold sweat and wasn’t screaming her head off was a testament to her inner strength. Many of the others were only groaning and wailing, not in any state to manage a decent conversation.

“I don’t know what grudge it is you bear against us,” she said, “but do you mean to get your fun by whipping us? The others will surely bring reinforcements, and then it’ll be you three who’ll get the lash!”

“Oh, come on,” I replied. “Not even you sound convinced by that. Can’t you lie any better?”

The ones who had run were Grond’s co-conspirators. Each and every one of them was complicit in his little fly-by-night operation and had taken massive sums of money out of town without paying a copper in tax, so they couldn’t exactly ring up the authorities.

“That’s if they even think to come back here in the first place,” I suggested.

“They won’t,” replied Shuria. “They are all too chicken to even consider it.”

“That’s right,” added Minnalis. “They wouldn’t be working for Grond if they had a backbone in the first place. They’re lower than ditchwater.”

“Maybe we should have killed them after all,” I pondered, “Though I’m pretty certain they had nothing to do with this whole affair. It’s kind of against my beliefs to lay a hand on uninvolved parties directly.”

I shrugged, then looked back at the maid.

“By the way, whipping? Are you serious? You really think I’m going to let you off that lightly?”

“Rgh!”

I flashed a peaceful smile, which drove her rotten mouth into silence.

“We don’t have a lot of time, that’s true. We need to be quick if we’re going to kill Grond after this. However...”

My voice turned low and raspy, barely above a whisper.

“...Don’t think that means I’m going to skimp on my revenge for you.”

Saying this, I withdrew a thin metal spike with a hollow center. It was about as long as one of those thick whiteboard pens, but its whole surface was rough, like a file.

“I’m going to drive this through your legs. It’ll take you about...oh, I’d say an hour, before you bleed out. Your vital fluids will drip down your body, and you’ll die screaming in terror.”

I could almost feel how unsightly my grin must have looked.

“Eek! Wh-who are you? There’s something wrong with you...!”

Something wrong, huh? I’d heard that a lot since my second chance began. If there was something wrong with me, then so be it. That didn’t change what I had to do.

“I don’t want to hear that from a degenerate like you. How you can get turned on by kids at your age is beyond me.”

“Ugh! How did you...?”

“Besides, you lot are getting off easy.”

Sadly, all I knew about these people was that they’d been on the list I’d found in Fegner’s diary the first time around. I could only guess at what they’d really done. That meant that I would have to go a little easy on them, just in case there were any that hadn’t actually hurt the kids.

Though if there was, it wouldn’t weigh too heavily on my conscience—these

lowlifes already had plenty enough reason to die.

“I’m just going to sit here and watch you expire. You can shout abuse at me if you wish, you can beg for your life, say your prayers, confess your sins, whatever. I’m not going to get involved. I’ll just sit here and listen.”

“H-how is that getting off easy?!” one of them shouted.

“What do you mean?” I replied. “You get to keep your voice. You can say whatever you want right up until the moment you shuffle off this mortal coil. That’s more than others got.”

“Th-this can’t be happening... It can’t! Aaaagh!”

“Oh, shut up already!” Shuria shouted in annoyance, and drove her spike into the woman at once. “Ahh, that sounds much nicer,” she chirped upon hearing her screams.

“Hey, we were still in the middle of a conversation!” I protested.

“But I couldn’t wait any longer!” Shuria replied. “Besides, my head’s been hurting this whole time from all this complicated stuff! And not in the good way that I usually like!”

Throwing a pouting fit, Shuria drove two more spikes into her target.

“Hrgh! S-stop, please stoppp!”

“Really, Shuria? You don’t have a lot of patience, do you?” asked Minnalis.

“Hgraaaargh! Gh! Gh...gaaaagh! Stop it...please... Gh...uh...”

“You say that, but you just did the same thing,” I noted.

“Oh, did I? Whoopsie! 🎵 How strange! Hee-hee-hee!”

“Hguuugh... Agh... Stop... Stop twistiiiiing...!”

Minnalis giggled as she played dumb, sticking in a sixth spike and moving it around.

“Oh, fine,” I said. “I can’t even force myself to get angry now.”

“Why don’t you join in the fun, Master? Unless you want to leave all the best bits to Shuria and me?”

“Haah, I suppose you’re right. Guess I’ll do some, too, then. I still think you shouldn’t twist them around like that, though, Minnalis. You might make them pass out.”

“Gyagaaaaghh! Take it out! Take it ooout!”

While lecturing Minnalis, I inserted a few spikes of my own.

“Oh, quite right, Master. I must be careful,” she replied. “It’s not like working with those dim-witted goblins we practiced on at all.”

“Ghiie! It huuurts! Stop iit!”

“Tra-la-la! 🎵 You’re such a scatterbrain sometimes, Minnalis,” sang Shuria.

“Gyaaagh! It hurts! Gaaagh!”

“Keep it together, please,” said Minnalis. We’re only on number four. We’re doing six spikes each, so there’s still two to go!”

“Owowowowwww! Let me go, pleeeease!”

The air was thick with the stench of blood. And the screams. It was full of so many screams. All overlapping, growing deeper, heavier, and cloaking the moonlit woods in an echoing chorus.

“You’re the last one.”

“Eek! St-stay away! Stay away, stay away, stay away!”

I hadn’t really planned it this way, but the last one remaining was the man I’d killed the first time around. The guy who had been spying on me while the children met their end.

“Y-you devil! What did I ever do to you?! Just because I’ve slept around a little!”

“Yeah, using drugs that make it so they can’t fight back... You make me sick.”

The first spike.

“Gyaaaaaaaagh!”

I heard the crunch as it tore through his flesh, saw his face contort with terror. The first time around, I had been too angry to do anything but burn him

to a crisp, killing him instantly without a chance to suffer.

“Right, then that’s that. Now on to number two.”

The second spike.

“Ggghh! Ghhhh!”

“Although, I say it makes me sick, that part isn’t really what bothers me at all.”

The third spike.

“Hgyaaagh! Gaaagh!”

“And unfortunately, I have no way of making you remember what you did.”

The fourth spike.

“Aaargh! Gyaaaaaagh!”

“But / remember. I remember it all. And I won’t let you pretend it never happened. Any of it. I’m going to make you pay for every last crime you committed!”

The fifth spike.

“Just...stop... Please...stop... Grrrh?!”

The last spike rested in my hand. I looked down at it with a peaceful, loving smile.

“Please...somebody...please help...”

“Die in the pits of this hellhole, just like those boys and girls did.”

I saw him off into the abyss with a grin. Then I ran the final spike into his leg.

“Graaaaaaagh...”

“Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

His face was warped with agony beyond recognition. His blood dripped down his body, mingled with his tears, and struck the ground.

“The pain! Let me go! Don’t you have any idea who you’re dealing with?! Let me gooo!”

“Ah, ah, ah... The blood... It...it won't stop...”

“Aaaiieeee! It hurts it hurts it huuurts!”

“I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. I'll do whatever you want, please just let me go! Gyaaaagh!”

“No, no, no, no, I don't want to die! Somebody, please, save me! *Sob...hic...* I'll never do anything bad again, I promise! It just hurts so much... I don't want to die... Waaahh...”

We had already created quite the spectacle by the time we had finished fixing up all twelve of them.

“Well done, Minnalis. The poison seems to be working quite nicely.”

“Thank you, Master.”

As always, the spikes were coated with one of her signature poisons. It kept changing the target's pain sensitivity so that they alternated between bouts of agony and clarity. Pain and terror. They would feel everything there was to feel before their deaths, and the blood trickling down their bodies was like sand in an hourglass counting down their last precious moments.

The air was choked with screams of pain and fear.

“Finished at last. We didn't have long, but this'll make sure they feel just a fraction of what those children felt.”

Screaming, crying. Terrified wretches, begging for their lives.

“...But dying in despair, their wishes going unanswered.”

I wouldn't interfere with that. It was the least I could do.



“Urgh...grh... What...happened...?”

I awoke to a cold breeze passing over me and shivered. Rubbing my head, I slowly sat up.

I was inside a carriage.

“That's right...I was... I was drugged, and then...!”

As my mind hastily struggled to recount what had happened, I suddenly leaped up and crawled out of the carriage. However, I didn't find what I was looking for.

"Ah...ah... Aaaaaaaarghhh! Those cursed, contemptible fieeeends!"

They were gone! Completely vanished!

Both wagons had disappeared without a trace, along with all my money!

I searched the area, but the only things here were the carriage I had just woken up in, and the horses pulling it.

"Curses, curses, curses! Aaaaghh! Why do they just keep getting in my way?!"

I didn't know who they were. I didn't know how they'd done it. All I knew was that my fortune was gone.

I was flat broke.

Those loathsome, detestable words began forming in my mind.

"Urgh! Aaagh! This can't be happening...!"

Darkness was closing in on me. How long had it been there? For the longest time I felt like I had crossed a point of no return, and every step only took me deeper and deeper into the inky depths.

"Urrrghh! Why?! Whyyy?!"

Try as I might, I couldn't shake free of it. The darkness descended on me, laughing.

"N-no... It's all right. I still have this!"

I clutched the pouch of coins around my neck. They were quite possibly the only reason I was still alive now. That sweet, flowery fragrance, it had to have been some kind of poison, and I very nearly perished because of it.

The coins in this pouch were equivalent to the fortune of a small company. All I had to do was make it to the empire in one piece.

"...Hooh... Haah... Never thought *I'd* be driving one of these..."

I took a few deep breaths to calm my nerves and climbed into the driver's

seat. Naturally, I had never driven horses before, but I was familiar with the theory, at least. It would have been more efficient to ditch the carriage and simply ride one of the horses, but that seemed even more dangerous to attempt without experience.

“Get moving, you idle beasts!”

““Whiihihiie!””

I whipped the horses, perhaps a little harder than necessary due to my heightened emotional state, and set the animals off into a gallop. I sped off down the highway, itching to get to my destination as the carriage rattled behind me. Looking up into the night sky, I saw a splendidly brilliant moon overhead.

“Grr, I had planned to make camp once we gained a little more distance from Dartras, but perhaps now the best thing is to keep on going until I find a town with an inn.”

It wouldn't be too difficult now that I only had one carriage. Plus, I was still wide awake. Perhaps it was the unplanned nap I had just taken, or maybe I was simply too angry to feel tired. My blood felt hot, as though I were drunk, and I lashed the reins again.

Just then...

“““Kupie!”””

“What's this?! A monster horde?!”

A trio of monsters leaped into the road, voices like rusted harp strings. Their characteristic pale blue bodies jiggled.

““Whiihihiie!””

“A-a group of slimes. Why are they here...?”

The frightened horses stopped in their tracks, as did the carriage I sat upon. Unfortunately, there was no time to seek an answer to my question.

“Bwiihihiie?! Hgh!” “Hihiie...Gh...”

“St-stay back! Curses!”

The slimes pounced on the horses before I could do anything. Unable to flee or even put up a decent fight while fastened to the carriage, they were engulfed in the monsters' translucent bodies.

There was a hiss of dissolving flesh and two wisps of smoke. I leaped down from the carriage and fled into the forest. Slimes differed from garm, goblins, orcs, and other creatures. Their appetite was bottomless. They would surely come after me once they finished off the horses. I needed to get as far away from them as possible.

But as my bad luck would have it...

"Kupiiie!"

Another slime?!

My hopes dashed, I shot off in a different direction.

"Hrh! Hrh! Curse it, curse it, curse it aaaaall!"

Panic. Anger. Bewilderment. Paranoia. Helplessness. Frustration. As I pushed myself through the undergrowth, one emotion after the other bubbled to the surface and manifested in my wild screams.

"Haah... Ng... Haah... I...am... I...am...the head of the Grond Company...!"

I don't know how long I was running for. I scrambled from tree to tree, constantly fleeing from the monsters that kept appearing. Eventually, I found myself in the depths of the forest. Hounded also by my lack of physical fitness, I was completely out of breath, and my legs could take no more.

"Curses. I don't...believe this..."

I pressed my back to another tree, attempting to conceal myself in its shadow. Slimes were not as fast as I had been led to believe, it seemed. They were slow enough to be outrun on foot. The forest was not too thick, and I had the light of the moon helping me, so I had managed to evade them for the moment.

However, either this forest was some sort of breeding ground, or the same individual specimens had found some other way to get ahead of me, because no matter how many I escaped from, there always seemed to be another

waiting around the corner.

“Kupie!”

“Argh! Why is it always slimes?!”

Another monster showed up before I even had time to catch my breath.

“Haah...haah...haah...haah...”

I crouched down in a bush to regain my breath once I decided I was far enough away.

“Haah...hooh...haah...hooh...”

What do I do now? I can't keep this up much longer...

While I was taking the opportunity to rest whenever I could, the panic and fear were starting to get to me, slowly whittling away my nerves. I regretted my somewhat hasty decision to run into the forest. The woods were monster territory. I should have fled down the old highway instead, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

“Wait, that smoke... Adventurers?”

Up ahead, I suddenly spotted a column of smoke drifting up through a gap in the trees. It was a miracle! I shot to my feet and bolted off in that direction.

“Kupi-pie?”

“Argh, another slime!”

It chased after me as I raced toward the smoke. I ran, and ran, and ran, until at last the clearing came into view.

I just have to make it there... Just a little farther...

I urged my clumsy feet onward, my eyes squarely on my destination...

“Please, you have to help m— Wh-what?!”

Any words I could come up with to describe what I saw there failed me. What first caught my eye was an enormous bonfire directly ahead, built in a hole some distance away. That pit was surrounded by a ring of fire, which crackled and tossed the smoke I had seen into the air.

And illuminated by those flames were dozens of lifeless corpses. Their faces were frozen in masks of terror and anguish, and their bodies were filled with spikes. They hung upside-down from the tree branches, their blood drained from them and pooled onto the ground beneath.

The smell of death filled the air. It was such a sadistic sight it didn't seem real.

"What?! Wh...what...?"

"...Hey. Who exactly do you think is going to help you?"

"Hrk!"

That voice, that whisper, sent a chill down my spine and gripped the very pit of my stomach. I spun around as fast as I could. Standing there was a black-haired man holding a sword aloft, an emotionless smile plastered across his face.

"Now, remember. Remember why nobody here will extend a hand to the likes of you."

"W-wait! Waaaaaaait!"

The man brought his blade down, and it pierced my chest.

"Grrrrgh! My...my head... Grrugh! What's...happening to me? You're...the hero? No...I heard the hero had been captured... Why? Where's Fegner? There was a contract...to receive tax exemptions from the kingdom and the empire... No, that's not right... I was on my way to the empire... Rrrraaaaaarrrrghhh?!"



I watched Grond scream. After forcing him to regain his memories, the Eight-Eyed Sword of Clarity vanished into thin air.

"Haah...haah...haah...haah..."

The merchant fell to his knees, clutching his head as though it would fall apart otherwise.

"..."

"You bastard... What have you done to me?! What's going on here?!"

Grond turned to me with a look so full of fury I could almost hear his molars

grate.

“Answer me, Herooooooooo!”

His rage-filled cry echoed throughout the silent clearing.

“Heh. Hah-hah-hah!”

The confusion in Grond’s eyes was now only at his situation. Any bewilderment as to my identity had disappeared.

“Oh, welcome back. Welcome back at last, Grond! I’ve been waiting so long! So very long! So long I couldn’t stand it! At last, at last, at laaaaaast!”

I had yearned to see him after all this time. After all this waiting.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, how I’ve dreamed of this day, over and over and over again! Do you know how much I’ve been looking forward to it? Do you? Do you?! You’re here at last! At last! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Now, you’ll die, die, die by my hand! Not a shred of solace. Not a sliver of salvation. Not a modicum of mercy. I’m on the verge of tearing you limb from limb and tossing you into a sea of despair.

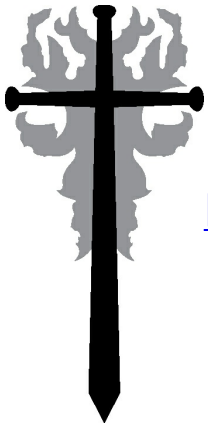
“Don’t laugh at me! Curse you, detestable hero!”

“How could I not laugh at this?!” I replied. “Don’t you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting?! How am I supposed to hold back now?! I danced on your stage the first time, and now it’s your turn! So dance, pig, dance!”

Right now, I felt...

“...And die, broken, in the pits of despair!”

...yes, I felt happy. Happy enough to laugh harder than I’d ever laughed before.



FINAL CHAPTER

A Worthless Grave in Four Colors

There's nothing in this world that money can't buy. All you need is enough of it.

More than anybody else. That's the only way to succeed at life.

So I built. I built my tower of gold. That is how I lived. That is how I've always lived.

Which means that, Hero, you are my enemy.

Your knowledge was useful to me, but your very existence is an affront to my beliefs.

You always despised this world, crying *I want to go home, I want to go home*.

You had no respect for this place. No respect for the money of this world.

All the wealth, all the power I'd obtained, meant nothing to you. Like worthless dirt in your eyes.

And you never even noticed how furious that made me.

The sheer apathy that came out of your mouth, not as someone who was strong, but as someone who was weak.

It was like so much mud that washed over me and sullied my heart.

...Nobody will be there to grant your wishes.

You'll rue the day you insulted money when I use it to hound you across the

land, leaving you with nowhere left to turn.

And at long, long, last, I could take my revenge. I remember watching that glorious spectacle.

"...Goddammit... GODDAMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMIT!"

"Heh-heh-heh! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a sorry sight, Hero! Do you really care so much for that trash? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I heard the hero's pain-filled voice in my ears. I laughed and beat my hands against the desk in delight.

"Mr. Grond, sir. I am afraid it is not terribly good manners to laugh at your defeated opponent."

"How can I not laugh at this, Fegner? Look! Look at what that lousy hero is forced to endure!"

I peered at the imagery being magically sent to me via my subordinate on the scene.

"Heh-heh-heh! I wonder what he feels at this moment? Seeing those children, warped beyond recognition, trying to kill him... What a pathetic sight!"

I could barely hold back my pleasure. I wanted to see him suffer even more!

"This is good, so good! I need more!"

Eventually, the hero killed my subordinate, as I expected he might, and the feed cut out.

"You've only yourself to blame, Hero! Hah-hah-hah! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Everything was going to plan. I hadn't really expected those failures would be enough to kill him. Just watching what happened was good enough for me. He would meet his end soon enough, one way or another.

He was strong, but unlike the demon lord, he was only one man. There was nobody on his side. Perhaps it would be the princess who dealt with him eventually. She seemed to bear more of a grudge against him than anyone else.

"Oh, I suppose I shouldn't call him the hero anymore, but the new demon lord. Tonight's wine shall taste delightful, very delightful indeed! Ah-ha-ha-ha-

ha..."

It felt good, cackling from the bottom of my heart and showcasing the power of money to someone who thought their ideals put them above it all.

Then the colors faded, and that memory dissolved away. I knew then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what I had seen was no illusion. The joy I'd found within it tickled the edges of my heart.

A pair of eyes turned down upon me, laughing and laughing as though there were something hilarious about my existence.

"Now it's your turn! So dance, pig, dance! ...And die, broken, in the pits of despair!"

...It was the hero.



"Don't laugh! Don't laugh, you bastard! What are you planning? Whose memories are these?!"

"Oh, shut up, fatty."

"Grhh?!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! What a sorry sight, Grond!"

With nothing but a single kick, I sent Grond rolling across the ground. Not only was he coated in sweat, but he'd also gotten his clothes muddy and tattered while running through the forest.

The sight was everything I'd been hoping for. It made all the pain and toil I had endured worth it. His eyes looked sunken and hollow, and his cheekbones were gaunt, as though he'd contracted some kind of disease. He reminded me of the orphanage children, the very last time I had seen them alive.

"Haah... Ghh... Wipe...that disgusting grin...off your face...you lousy worm!"

"Oh, shut up. You're the worm here, wriggling in the dirt," I retorted.

"Silence, silence, silence! Answer me, fool! Why did I have those memories?! What is going on here?! And stop looking at me with that contemptible smirk, Herooooo!"

He clutched his head as if in pain, and looked at me with mad, beady eyes. Just then, a cool, night wind chilled the air, and an unnatural silence descended upon the place, as if there were nobody there at all.

Then at last, I answered.

“...Why, my revenge, of course.”

“Re...venge...?”

“That’s right. Don’t worry, you don’t need to know the whole story. Just know that we’re going to finish off that rotten hell you started, right here, right now.”

That dark, cold, painful, hot, blood-stained world. It was all going to end here. This is what everything had been leading up to. The scars you’d made were still wet, even now. Wet with their blood.

“Hah! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Vengeance, you say?!” You don’t know the first thing about vengeance! You were a fool; that’s all there was to it! You told me to spend the profits on those children, and that’s exactly what I did!”

The man didn’t show an ounce of remorse for what he’d done. I said nothing, only listened to him speak. For as much as I longed to stuff something down his throat to silence him once and for all, I needed to hear him out until it felt like my ears were about to rot off.

“This all happened because you disrespected the power of money! Money is power, power no man can deny! Those children didn’t have two coppers to rub together, and that is why they died! They were weak!”

“ ... ”

“It is wealth that decides the worth of men! You expect me to spend it on peace? On building a home for those sniveling whelps? Who would ever throw their coin away like that?! It’s all because of you that things turned out this way! All because you told me to spend my money on those useless brats! What in the world did you *think* I was going to do?!”

“ ... ”

“It’s all your fault! If only you had never come here, prattling on about *going back home*, never showing the slightest bit of interest in finance! Never

showing the slightest bit of respect for the wealth *you* helped create! As if all of it, every last copper, were utterly worthless to you! But you're wrong! Money is blood! Money is life!"

When he was done, Grond just lay there, his eyes brimming with fire. At long last, I replied.

"...Well, just as I can never understand your way of thinking, I'm sure you can never understand mine," I said. "That's why...you're right, Grond. All that money you spent your life chasing, none of it had any value to me whatsoever. But I'm overjoyed to hear you say that. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't."

Thank goodness. What a relief.

You need to have something to cling on to. We can't let you lose hope just yet.

After all, we're not finished with you.

There's plenty more despair to go.

"Now, gaze upon this, Grond! This shall be your final stage!"

"Grrrrhhh! Let...let me go!"

I grabbed his hair, dragging him over to the pit which still roared with flames.

While Grond was indeed my sworn enemy, he was only a merchant. Not a warrior like me, and certainly not strong enough to resist once he was in my grasp.

"Ghh... Guh..."

I threw him to the ground at the edge of the hole. Minnalis and Shuria were already there, waiting with frigid smiles.

"Wh-who the hell are you...?" he asked.

"Me?" replied Minnalis. "Why, I'm Master's partner in crime, of course."

"Please just pretend we're not here," added Shuria. "We're only going to meddle a teeny-tiny bit."

"Quite right," said Minnalis again. "We're done laying the groundwork, so

now we can play to our hearts' content!"

"The...groundwork? I see...you're the cretins who ruined my company!"

"Huh? You're only just realizing that now? Geez, Mister, you sure are slow on the uptake," mocked Shuria.

"...I'll kill you... I'll murder the whole lot of you! You'll pay for this, you'll all pay! You'll all die, just like those children did... Gh!"

"Hold on, Grond. What was that you just said?"

Before I could even stop myself, a voice frozen stiff with anger left my lips, and my boot came up and stomped again and again on Grond's back.

"What did you just say you were going to do to my dear, dear accomplices? Huh?"

"Gaaaaagh!"

"Don't fuck with me, Grond. You're not laying one dirty finger on anything of mine ever again. I'll see to that."

"Master, p-please calm down. We're supposed to be having fun, remember?"

"You're going to kill him, Kaito! You can't waste his life like that!"

My two lovely partners in crime pulled me back to my senses, and I slowly lifted my boot away.

"Uh... Ah. Uh...sorry. Thanks."

"Ghuhh... *Cough, cough.*"

Blood was dripping from Grond's lips after his thorough beating. I'd probably broken a few ribs and ruptured some organs, too. Even after cooling down, I still felt satisfied at what I'd done, but the girls were right. We couldn't let him die just yet.

...For crying out loud, I really am a lost cause.

I silently castigated my own hastiness as I drew the Nephrite Blade of Verdure and healed Grond's wounds.

"Urgh... Uuugh..."

“Hey, I don’t recall giving you permission to pass out. Stay awake, now.”

“Ugh... Guph!”

Then I resuscitated Grond by splashing water on his face.

“Now then. Let’s get started. This pit shall be your grave.”

Finally, I cut off his boots with my sword, leaving him barefoot, before grabbing him by the scruff of his neck.

“Nrgh! Graaaargh!”

Using Air Step, I jumped up and tossed the man into the pit, encircled by glowing flames.

The pit was circular, and inside were two different depths. The first level was about three meters deep and consisted of five platforms arranged at the four corners and center of an imaginary square, like the pips on a die, with a space left around the outer rim. From there, the hole extended six meters farther down, creating a moat we had filled with water. Suspended above that moat was a mesh made from iron bars, fixed between the five platforms.

I had thrown Grond into the center platform, using my Air Step to get close enough that he didn’t take any damage from the fall. After all, it would be a shame if he twisted his ankle before the show began.

“G-gh... What is this? What’s going on?”

The flames around the edge of the hole heated up the air inside. It scorched Grond’s skin and hampered his breathing.

“Oh, not much, just a little game I thought up,” I replied.

“A what?! Oof!”

Suddenly, I emptied out my bag, and all the money I’d taken from Grond came raining down from above.

“Grh?!”

Coppers, silvers, gold coins. A glittering cascade of currency, tens of thousands of pieces of metal, fell upon Grond and his vicinity.

“Stop... Stop it!”

“Look, Grond, it’s your precious fortune. All the wealth you scraped together in your grubby little paws.”

The clink of metal rang out as the coins fell through the holes in the chain-link net and landed in the sea below. By the time that noise had settled, nearly all of Grond’s fortune lay sparkling beneath the surface of the water as the blaze rose around him.

Surely, Grond would be beside himself with excitement at seeing so much money before his eyes. But would he be able to enjoy it? That was the question.

“You worm... Don’t you know your place?!”

“I told you, didn’t I? *You’re going to dance for me.*”

At long last, our drawn-out first act had come to a close. I had no more happy dreams for Grond, no further hope to let him cling to. He’d had enough. From here on out, there was only pain. Pain and anguish.

“Down we go.”

I dropped down from my Air Step platform and landed by the rim of the pit. The girls had laid out a picnic sheet and were sitting there, Minnalis kneeling politely while Shuria hugged her knees like a child in gym class. We had left a gap in the ring of fire at this location so that we could watch what happened clearly.

There, I took out a jug and conjured the Fairy’s Blade of Water. Using it, I drew the water from the container to form a ball in midair about half a meter across. Then I brought something else from my pouch, a leather sack marked with a peculiar symbol.

“Th-that’s...!”

“Ha-ha-ha! So even you’re smart enough to recognize this mark! And here I thought you didn’t care for anything but your money.”

Inside that sack was a powdered narcotic: the Lemonade I had stolen from the Slugs after crushing their gang. Loosening the string, I emptied the entire bag into the ball of water. Then using my soul blade to command the liquid, I mixed it all in until the water turned a clear blue, glistening in the orange glow

of the flames.

“So tell me, Grond. What do you know about Lemonade? Do you remember what it’s made from?”

I took in my hand a single gold piece.

“What it’s made from...? I believe it was called Hyperanabolic Acid... Wait, you don’t mean...!”

“Precisely. It boosts stats while being incredibly addictive. But not only that...”

I tossed the coin into the ball of water.

“...It’s a powerful weathering agent that breaks down metals into worthless dirt.”

With a sizzling noise, like a blacksmith quenching a blade, the golden coin quickly lost its luster and turned to earth in a flurry of pale green bubbles.

“Now,” I went on, “at this concentration, even half this volume could melt down all the coins down there. However...”

“Wh-what?! You fiend!”

“Yeah, yeah. Fiend, demon, I’ve heard it all before. Can’t you come up with something a little more original?”

I shrugged theatrically and continued.

“This is where the game comes into it. I could just add this water into the pool...”

“N-no! Stop! That’s my money you’re talking about!”

“Exactly. It’s your cash. So I’m giving you the choice. If you choose to drink all of this water, I’ll stop right here. I won’t do anything more. Of course, ingesting this much of the drug is sure to be fatal...but it won’t kill you *right* away. You’ll get about a year to live.”

“What?!”

“Or you can let it all fall into the water and watch what happens from there. Watch as all your hard-earned coin is reduced to dirt before your eyes and feel the burning pain as those green bubbles wash over you. Your suffering will

mean the death of Grond the Merchant, but you can live out the rest of your days as Grond the Pauper in peace.”

“Grh! Grrrrrrhh!”

“The outcome of the game is simple. Either you lose all your money and turn into the very person you’ve spent your entire life despising, or you save it, and live out what little time you have left as the winner you’ve always believed yourself to be. Now, let the game begin! Good luck!”

“Rh!”

“Think you can drink up all the water in this ball?”

With a spectacularly wide grin on my face, I hovered the orb directly above Grond, leaving everything that happened next in his greedy, dirt-stained hands.

“Hgh...glg...oh...”

The water came at him drop by drop. Without even a moment’s hesitation, Grond opened his mouth to try and drink it all up. Of course, his posture made it difficult for him to swallow, so the first few drops found their way down his clothes, causing his buttons and buckles to fizzle.

“Glb!b... Gh... *Cough!*”

“Nice, keep it up. I’m guessing that hurts quite a bit.”

Each tiny puff of vapor released when the metal transformed was like a dragon’s breath on his skin.

“Grrrrhhh! Rrrrhhh! Rrrhhh!”

Realizing what was happening, Grond undid his suit and cast it aside.

“Ah-ha-ha, if only you could see how stupid you look now!” I jeered.

“My, what an indecent sight that is. I suppose it makes the show that much greater, though. Hee-hee! Oh? My, this tea is far tastier than I thought.”

“It’s goody-good! A nice show makes the food taste oh-so-much better!”

Minnalis and Shuria giggled and smiled as though they were sitting at the theater watching a play.

Then after Grond had been drinking for quite some time, the flow stopped.

“Ngh. Haah...haah... You’ll pay for this...”

Objectively speaking, the amount Grond had just ingested was nothing—about the volume of a coffee cup. Judging by the moisture dripping off his skin, he had sweated more than that much in the meantime.

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s right, keep it up!” I said, my lips twisting into a grin. “That’s it for the tutorial.”



Lose all my money, or die an early death with it? What kind of choice was that?!

Yet that damnable hero didn’t give me a chance to argue. I had no alternative but to drink the water that came flying at me. Perhaps owing to the unbearable heat, I felt dizzy, as though I had been at the wine all night.

I could see the hero and his compatriots perched at the edge of the pit, sipping tea and laughing at me. Just then, the flow of water cut out for a moment.

You fools. It doesn’t matter how much I drink, it’ll never affect me!

I still had the platinum coins around my neck. Those would keep the harmful effects of the drug at bay. Sure enough, I was feeling no stronger, nor my mind any keener, either.

That’s one thing you’ve failed to consider, Hero. I just have to survive this, then I’ll bide my time and build up my strength. Once I do...I’ll crush you like a bug.

All that was left was to ensure I really could down every last drop of water, but since I was just as quickly losing moisture to the flames, I didn’t feel any less thirsty now than when I began.

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s right, keep it up! That’s the tutorial over with.”

“Wha— Hrmm?!”

Suddenly, the water began flowing again. This time, however, the ball began

to move.

“Glg! Glg!”

“Don’t let up on your dancing now!”

At the hero’s loathsome jeer, the stream of droplets moved toward the edge of the platform, and then...

...over the metal net, heated by the roaring flames around the pit.

“Graaaagh! Gaaaaaaagghhh!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s right, Grond! Dance, dance, dance! Keep it up, or else your precious money will turn to dirt! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

I felt the skin of my feet burn as the pain shot up my legs.

So this is why he sliced off my boots!

Since the bars had not been heated directly by the flames, a pair of footwear would likely have sufficed to insulate me from the scalding metal. As things stood, however, it was far too hot for my bare feet. I didn’t know the exact temperature, but it was scalding enough that I couldn’t stand in one place for too long.

“Ngrh! Gggh...ghhhh... Euurgh!”

I opened my mouth wide to catch the falling drops. The sound of them hitting my tongue overlapped with the sound of my own feet roasting on the bars. The platinum around my neck could only protect me from magical harm, not physical.

“Rgh...phah!”

Finally, the droplets reached the next platform over. At the same time, the flow stopped once more.

“Haah...haah... Ghah...”

“Heh-heh-heh,” the hero laughed. “Well done. You’ve reached the first checkpoint! But there’s no time to rest just yet, because you’ve got to beat all three levels of this!”

“W-wait...! Ngraaagh!”

Without even giving me ten seconds to catch my breath, the drops started again and began moving over to the next platform. Not even allowed an opportunity to brace myself, I stepped out unprepared onto the burning metal bars once more.

The blasted pain! Why should I have to be subjected to such humiliation?!

After another torturous walk, I reached the far platform at last. And once again, the flow of droplets stopped.

“Grh...haah... Please...let me rest... Ngrrrh!”

“Come on, we’ve only gone halfway around! It’s far too early to give up now!”

Once again, the hero granted me no reprieve, and before I could even tell if ten seconds had passed this time, I was sent out yet again onto the hot iron bars.

“You’re halfway through level one. Just a little longer and you’ll be on to the next one!”

“Ngh! Nghh! Ngh!”

Once more I heard the hero’s mocking voice, and once more the droplets rained down. This time, however, they started oscillating left and right as well.

“Come on! You’ll miss if you don’t pay attention. Then just think what’ll happen to your fortune! Heh-heh-heh!”

Grrr, that impudent twerp...

The hero and his two friends stared down at me with sadistic smiles. Then I at last returned to the same platform I had started my vile trek, having walked all the way around the perimeter of the square.

“Well done, Grond. You’ve managed to clear level one.”

“Haah...haah..... Grh!”

The hero clapped his hands and sneered. I wiped my sweat with the back of my hand and glared up at him with all the hate in my heart. The soles of my feet were crying out in pain, and when paired with the heat of the air, it was enough to cause my mind to cloud over. My face was soaked from the water I had failed

to drink, along with my tears and mucus. When I looked up, however, the ball of water overhead was only a little smaller than when we began.

“Come on, don’t look at me like that. Get too upset, and you’ll lose your coordination. You’ll need some catlike reflexes for the next two rounds.” The hero snickered before continuing. “Well, that’s quite enough of a rest, I think. Next comes level two. Good luck.”

“W-wait! I need more time... Nghhh!”

But I had to keep moving. The droplets were falling again, and I had to step out onto the iron bars to catch them. Before I could figure out what the hero had meant by “level two,” I found out the hard way.

“Graagh! *Cough Cough!*”

A shooting pain ran up my arm. Somehow, I managed not to choke.

Wh-what just happened?!

I knew the hero had done something to me, but I didn’t know quite what. And that wasn’t the last of the painful shocks.

“Agh?! *Cough!*”

Yet another series of jolts assailed my entire body. My shoulder, my hand, my back. An instant later, I heard something metal hitting the bars beneath my feet.

“Oops, I missed,” came a voice.

“That’s no good. You have to aim carefully, otherwise you’re just wasting money.”

“Listen, Shuria. It’s all in the wrist. They’re not made for throwing, so they don’t fly the same as throwing knives.”

Are they hurling coins at me?!

All my attention was focused on catching the drops, so I couldn’t look to check, but I could more or less tell what was going on from what I could hear.

I reached the next platform and was able to rest for a few seconds.

“You wretched fools! How long are you going to disrespect money before

you're satisfied?!"

"Ohh, looks like you still have some spring in your step! Here you are, you two, time to reload."

"I'm gonna hit you this time for sure, just you watch!"

"That's the spirit. Aim well, now! Tee-hee-hee!"

The hero grinned and held out a pile of coins as the two women cackled with glee.

"Take aim, you two. Make him work for his victory!"

"Aim carefully, like this!"

"Gh?! *Cough!*"

At the woman's voice, I felt another sharp pain in my neck. Since I was swallowing at the time, I almost gagged, but I forced it down so as not to spill any. My discomfort only seemed to translate into more enjoyment for the wretched duo, and they continued flinging coins without mercy.

"Hmm, I can't seem to hit where I'm aiming," said the short one.

"Well, at least you're getting him," replied the hero. "That's still good, isn't it?"

Curses, curses, curses! They're mocking me...!

After making my way from platform to platform, I finally succeeded in lapping the perimeter a second time.

"Haah...haah... Gh...haah..."

The ball of water overhead had grown smaller still. I had drunk so much, yet I felt thirstier than ever if anything. But I couldn't take much more of this. It hurt. Amidst the pain, the heat, and my body aching all over, I could only think about ending this as quickly as possible. My mind was singularly focused on my current task, so my senses remained as sharp as ever, mercilessly reporting the pain in my feet. That the only thing I could feel, along with the discomforting sensation of sweat on my brow, and the dull sound of the coins striking my body. My face was a mess, covered in sweat, tears, and drool, plus the water I

had failed to catch in my mouth.

“You’re in the home stretch of level two. Don’t let up now!”

The stream of droplets began moving back toward the center platform.

“Ugh... Nnn... Grh...”

My body was leaden, but I dragged it along. By now, my screams of pain were the same, regardless of whether I could feel the hot bars or not.

Just then...

“Hmm, wrist, wrist... What if I throw it like this?”

“Ngh! Gh!”

The little one tossed a coin at my foot, which struck me harder than any before. It knocked me off balance, and...

“GRAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHH!”

The heat, it burns!

My hands and face, which had gone unscathed so far, were now pressed into the scalding hot bars. I tried to pick myself up, but my hand went right through the corroded metal. The water running off my body had spilled onto it, turning it to mud. Of course, my arm found no solid purchase where expected, and I fell face-first onto the burning metal once more.

“Gaaaaaghh! It huuuurts!”

“Aha! 🎵 I got him! Critical hit!”

Several of the droplets had fallen through to the water below by the time I picked myself up again.

“AAAAAGAAGGGHHH! M-my...my...MY MONEEEEEEEYYYY!”

It amounted to no more than a single cupful of coins, but even that tiny amount caused the water to froth and bubble violently.

“Aha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s it, Grond! Show us how you struggle! Amuse us!”

“Arghh! Aughh! Uughh!”

I couldn't even stand up right away, so I stayed on my knees and guzzled down the liquid as best I could.

"Heh-heh-heh! That's too funny, Grond! Aha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"How ugly. Hee-hee-hee! He's flopping like a fish!"

"Tee-hee-hee! And I helped!"

The hero slapped the ground gleefully as his two companions glared at me with scorn.

Curses, curses, curseees! I'll see you hang for this, Heeerooo!

Still unable to stand, I crawled my way toward the next platform. Despite the hot bars scalding me even through my clothing, I succeeded in reaching it.

"Ghh...haah...hrrrgh..."

"Congratulations on passing level two, Grond. You've done so well, so very well indeed. Now then, next comes the final stage. Pass level three, and you're all clear. However..."

The hero cast a glance down at my useless feet.

"For level three, we'll stick to this platform. Finish off all the water, and you're officially a free man."

Krh. Heh. More than you think, Hero...!

"W-water... Give me waaateeerrr...!"

The heat and pain burned in equal measure.

Never in my life had I been made to feel this way. Very soon now, all that would be at an end. Now that I didn't have to deal with those superheated bars or those freakishly fast coins, it was as good as over. I just had to drink the remaining water, and I would be free of this place for good.

And the platinum will protect me from the Lemonade's harmful effects. This is nothing more than ordinary water to me, Hero!

"It's almost over...give it to me..."

"...Now, let's start level three. You've made it this far thanks to all the pain

and effort you endured. So keep it up until the very end!”

“Waaateeeeerrrr! Aaglg...ghah...glglg...”

Laugh while you still can, Hero. When I get my life back, I’m going to make yours a living hell!

I cursed the hero beneath my breath, making sure to keep up the act on the outside. I had to make it seem like I really was succumbing to the effects of the drug.

It was okay. The platinum would protect me.

The water came down again, in greater quantities this time.

“Oooh, nice. You’re getting good at this.”

“Ogh-gh...gh...glg...ngh...”

The hero sat there calmly, watching me. He was probably thinking I was a dead man by this point. *You’re a fraud, Hero! Just an insignificant bug incapable of thought!*

I laughed at him on the inside, but the very next moment, I got a chill down my spine.

“...So I suppose it’s about time, no?”

Suddenly, a diabolical grin flashed across the hero’s face.

“Grh?! ”

I got another bad feeling, just like I had when everything started to fall apart. This sensation always came just moments before disaster, leaving me without even time to wonder where I had gone wrong.

And this time was no different.

...Huh?

It was a tiny, insignificant sound that first alerted me to the abnormality. There was a minuscule sensation across my cheek, like a light scratch.

“Ngh...? Grh...ooooaahh?! ”

But it was like a collapsing sandcastle. Slowly at first, but growing faster and

faster, dozens and dozens of tiny cuts opened up all across my body.

“Gah?! Gaaaaghh?!”

What? What did he do?! What’s happening?!

Soon my entire body was covered in them, like a cracked wasteland. The wounds kept appearing, one after the other, slicing deeper into my flesh.

“Hey, Grond. Where do you think the protective effects of mithril come from?”

“Gph...ghah... Graaargh!”

It was even more painful than when I’d burned my skin on those metal bars. It felt like taking a file to my nerve ends directly. I sensed my mind being shaved away as I struggled to decipher the hero’s words.

Then with a swing of his sword, the flow of water ceased.

“Gh...gah...haah...haah...”

“The protective effect of mithril is really a tiny magical spell hidden inside the metal. Now, I have a question for you. When a mineral is turned into a magic item, it’s the mana contained within that mineral that produces the item’s effects. But where do you suppose mithril gets its mana from?”

“Huh? Wh-where does it...come from...?”

“Hint number one. If you’re normally so paranoid, how come you didn’t think I might know about the platinum pieces around your neck?”

I couldn’t think straight. Not just because of the pain. I felt cloudy...yes, just like I’d been downing wine the entire night...

“Hint number two. If a mineral takes in more mana than its safety mechanisms can address, it will eventually stop working.”

“Grh... What?! What are you talking about...?”

But the hero ignored my words. He went on.

“Hint number three. Humans don’t have those safeguards on their mana. Now do you know the answer?”

He looked at me expectantly, a wicked grin across his face.

The answer? What? But that would mean... No, but that's impossible...

The only conclusion my addled brain could come up with was one that I hastily discarded.

But the hero cackled, as though my bewilderment was greatly amusing to him.

“Time’s up, Grond. And there goes all that money you love so much.”

No, I didn’t want to hear it. But no matter how hard I thought that, the hero prattled on mercilessly.

“It uses *your* mana. And failing that, your health.”

“Grh!”

“What’s happening to you is exactly the same as when you try to cast magic when you’re out of mana. Now I have one last choice for you.”

Saying this, the hero started the flow of water again. I drank the droplets almost reflexively, out of fear that my money would dissolve. As I did, I felt another shooting pain.

“Nggghhhh! Urrrggghhh!”

“It’s your precious wealth that’s doing that to you, you know? And look, there’s still over half the water remaining. Now show me, Grond. Which will you choose?”

Choose? What does he mean, choose?

I’m supposed to choose? Between this torture and my money?

“Come on, Grond, say something. Your money or your life—which is more important?”

At those words, my mind, long since strained beyond its limits, finally snapped.

“Rgh...gh...gh...rrrrrrrggghhh!! Graaaaargh!”

And I finally willed myself to stop drinking those drops.

“...Ah, so that’s what you chose, huh?”

The look of utterly forced disappointment on the hero’s face did nothing to hide his demonic smile.

“I suppose that means we don’t need this anymore, do we?”

“No...stop...!”

“Nope. I mean, the game’s over, isn’t it?”

Then the hero let the rest of the liquid drop into the pit.

Immediately, the water beneath me sizzled, like the hissing of some great serpent, and air bubbles rushed to the surface like molten lava.

“No...no... My...money...my money... Grh!”

My legs went weak, and I dropped to my knees, watching the gold in the pool slowly lose its sheen. It was changing, transforming. All my gold was turning into worthless old dirt.

What I saw trampled the rest of my mind into mush, like grapes into wine.

“Aaaghh! Stop! Stop iiit! Stop it now!”

My entire fortune, that fortress of four-colored coins I’d spent my life collecting, became nothing more than mud on the seabed.

Even the platinum around my neck would surely be taken from me. How many years, decades would it take to build up that kind of wealth again?

“Now then, let’s move on to the final game: your punishment.”

“Th-there’s more?!”

I looked up at the hero in shock. But before I could even worry about what he had said, he said something else that stunned me speechless.

“Your very being is an affront to me. I cannot permit you to exist.”

“What?! Th-that’s...!”

The voice coming from the hero’s mouth was that of a *woman*. What’s more, I knew whose it was.

“From my fingers comes a freezing chill. From my mouth, a choking fog. You

will perish long before my touch."

"S-stop... No... Why? That's... The Curse of Saints! Nooo! Curse it, curse it, curse it all!"

I had seen that soul blade once before. I still remembered it now. No, I *just* remembered it now. Last time, it hadn't been directed at me, but still I remembered the feeling of my whole body being ripped away.

"Come, my pretty rose. You are in my hands at last. No other shall know your beauty. No other shall feel your charm. I shall turn you into mud, and you shall stay with me forevermore."

I had seen for myself that there was a soul, and I had been shown how a soul might die. It was a memory I longed to forget. A thought that filled me with dread like the ocean waters rushing in through a leaking hull.

"All that you are belongs to me."

I was powerless to resist it. It came closer and closer, carrying with it an icy chill that would stop my heart. Then finally, it appeared before me.

"Sword of Sin: Jealous Witch"

For a moment, all sound disappeared.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEE!"

"Hrh... Ah!"

It was shaped not like a sword. Not even a weapon of any kind. It was a woman, hair as black as death itself, who wore blood-soaked bandages over her eyes. Her skin was gray and ashen, and her arms and legs were bound by rust-eaten shackles. She stood atop the grip of the hero's sword in place of a blade, bound there by countless chains.

"Ahh, ahh, what jealousy, what envy, what hate. The first time I have been summoned in so long, and there is not a ray of sunlight to be seen. You all ought to perish for this."

"I see you haven't changed, Envy."

Just one look at her filled me with terror, but the hero only smiled his usual

smile.

"I cannot believe you! I am your sword, so how come you have not used me at all?"

"That's not my fault. Your downsides are rough at the best of times, and that's before even getting into the Curse of Saints."

"You know I don't understand any of that. I know you're using every other blade except me. And you even put some sort of nasty seal on me, too!"

"Hey, that wasn't my doing. Go complain to the goddess about that."

"I don't care about anyone except you and me! It's not fair, it's not it's not it's not! I wish everybody else would just go away!"

Some sort of black aura, visible to the eye, emanated from the woman's body.

"I'd say *don't be jealous*, but I guess that's kinda your whole thing. And you are a part of me... So do what I say."

"...It's just not fair."

The woman suddenly grew timid, and the aura retracted. Then the hero turned back to me.

"Now then, I suppose I don't need to explain to you how this works, do I?"

He was right. I knew all about what this soul blade could do. Once, when an evil dragon had provoked the hero's wrath, he'd used this blade to shred up its insides, leaving it to die in agony.

It gave him total control over the target's physical makeup. He could change flesh to steel, boil blood, and warp bones as he saw fit. That evil dragon had boasted a magical resistance on par with the demon lord herself, and even that had been no proof against the blade's horrifying effects.

And it didn't only kill. That wicked sorcery also afflicted the target's *soul* after they expired. Even when the dragon's body rotted away, a pale blue light remained rooted to the spot where it had once been. And then...

"No...please, no..."

I remembered peeking out of cover, shivering with fear as I watched what the

hero did next. Covered in blood, with one arm bitten off, he watched the dragon's body waste away...and smiled.

That was the most terrifying thing I'd seen in my entire life. The mere existence of such a power had shaken me to my core. And now, that very same power was about to be used on me.

"W-wait! I remember! You're bluffing! You can only use that ability on creatures that have tasted your blood!"

"Oh, that's quite alright. Because it was mixed in with all that water!"

"Wh...what...?"

I felt the color drain from my face. No matter where I looked, there was nowhere for me to run.

"Why, why, why?! You said if I gave up my money, you'd let me goooo!"

My most desperate words failed to land a single hit on the hero's poise.

"What? My word, Grond, you really are an idiot. Promises are built on trust; you should know that. What trust is there between us?"

"Ah...ahh...aahhh..."

The hero's words were level, calm, delivered without the slightest hint of emotion.

"Please... I'm sorry. I'll change my ways, turn over a new leaf. I'll leave that orphanage alone, never do another dirty deal so long as I live. I'll invest in whatever you want, so... Rh?!"

"I told you, there's no trust between us. Besides, what was it you said? *'It is money that decides the worth of men.'* Well, your dough's all gone. So what are you worth to me now?"

"B-but...!"

"I've made you dance, just like you made me dance before. But tell me, did you really think I was going to let you go? You took everything those children had. Why should you get to live while they died?"

"...Ahh...ahh... No, I don't want to die... I can't expire...while I have nothing..."

Stop... Please stop... Those children you're talking about...they're still alive, aren't they? I haven't done anything to them yet! I haven't—"

"Silence, pig. I won't let you speak another word."

The hero hit me with a threatening aura so strong I could almost hear the rumbling thunder.

"Eep! Ah...ah...ah..."

It was then I understood. Understood it all. There was no hope for me. No salvation.

"I'm done talking to you, Grond. I don't even want to hear you begging for your life. So I'll silence that squealing voice of yours."

"Whiiiiiiiiieeee!"

"Kh-khah?!"

All of a sudden, my throat froze. I hastily put my hands to my neck, only to feel the cold touch of metal. I tried to speak, but all I could do was exhale wordlessly.

"We're finally reaching the end, Grond. Now it's your turn. Your turn to suffer, to die in pain, without even getting a chance to scream, just like those children. Now, sing, Envy. *Sculpted Rose*."

As the hero swung his sword, I heard its rattling chains.

"Hiiiiiiiiieeee! Fwoooooo!"

"...Hh! Hhhh! Hhhhh?!"

The pain started in my fingers and toes, like thousands of needles piercing my skin. When I looked down, I saw tiny red crystals growing out of me. I had seen this once before. The hero had turned his own blood into blades of ice, transforming the wicked dragon into a living pincushion.

"Fwoooooo! Hiiiiiiiiieeeeeeee!"

"...! ...! ...!"

The noise sounded like an echoing scream that tore through my eardrums, while the spears of frozen blood tore through my skin. My arms, my legs, my

shoulders, my back. The crystals engulfed me, turning me into a frozen sculpture.

Ahh, why? Why did it have to come to this...?

That was the last question I saw in the blinding white of my pain-streaked mind.

“Hhhh! Hhhhhh! Hhhhh!”

I could no longer move. I didn’t even know how I could still think.

“Why is it, I wonder? Look at the way the blood glistens in the firelight. Look at the radiant crystals—shouldn’t it be beautiful?”

I couldn’t even pass out due to the constant pain. I tried to scream, but the only thing that came out was my panicked breaths.

“So why is it, then?! I see nothing of value when I look at you! Why do you still live?! Listen to me! Why did those children have to die?! Why did they have to feel pain they never should have felt, when they were trying so hard to live?!”

What I saw through blurry eyes then was no hero. Only a being of pure spite, tainted by hatred and disgust.

“So what if nothing has happened yet? What about the children from the first time?! You think it’s all been forgotten just because time was rewound?! Don’t make me laugh, Grond! Even if all trace of what you did is gone, so long as I remember it, I will make it my life’s mission to see you pay!”

Ah... I see now. I created this devil. We all did. And now he’s loose. Curse it all...

“That is why you must die, Grond. Turn to mud, along with everything you held dear.”

There was not an ounce of warmth in that demon’s parting words.

“...Sing, Envy. Ashen Shell.”

“Laaaaaaaaaaa! Laaaaaaaaaaa! Laaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

It didn’t sound like a woman’s voice. It sounded more like metal. High-pitched, like a ghostly shriek, yet solemn, like a choral hymn.

I could feel my body turning into metal bit by bit. My flesh, my bones, my crystallized blood.

No. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Somebody...somebody please...help me...grh!

Eventually, the whole of my body was replaced with cold steel. I couldn't speak, couldn't move, couldn't even blink. I didn't know how I was still alive. I couldn't even feel pain, perhaps because there was no body left to hurt.

It just felt cold. So very, very cold.

"That's your grave, Grond. Now lie in it."

That voice came at me straight from the pits of hell, and with it, a single copper coin, which struck my motionless body with a cold clink. Unable to resist, I could only wait in fear as I swayed, and in the next moment I was falling backward into the water.



Rgh?! It burns, it buuuuuurns!

I'm melting! Melting!

With a horrific hiss, my entire body began turning into clay. That was the pain of metal. A feeling the human body could never feel, never understand.

"Ah-ha-ha! Aha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right, drown in the waters of your dreams! Turn to mud, leaving nothing behind!"

The voice came at me muffled through the surface of the water. With a pain that lasted either an eternity or a moment, I was transformed into dirt. Then once all the pain had gone, dark gray chains lifted my soul from the water.

"Ahh, what a beautiful soul. It's not fair, not fair! It's not fair that souls should get to be so free! Suffer, suffer, suffer!"

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The chains clamped around me tighter and tighter. It wasn't pain I felt now, but something more primal still. An existential discomfort pushed as far as it could possibly go. It was suffering—pure, distilled agony. I felt my very being disappear, be stolen from me, as though I were dissolving into an icy lake. It was enough to make me yearn for the pain of earlier.

"No, no, no, suffer more! Stay far, far below me! I can't allow anything to be better than me!"

"Aaaagh hh...agh...agh...aagh..."

I felt myself sliced thinner and thinner, until there was nothing left.

"You're a devil...pure evil. You took my money, my body, and even my soul..."

"A devil? That's not right. As far as you're concerned..."

The hero showed me his twisted smile once again and laughed at me.

"...I'm the demon lord, the enemy of humanity, aren't I?"

He pulled the chain of my gallows.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

With a scream literally from my soul, my very existence was erased from this

world, leaving not even dust behind. Yet still, up until those very last moments...

“Heh-heh! Aha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

...All I could hear was the mad laughter of the demon lord, spelling out my worthless end.



The pieces of Grond’s soul dispersed into the night sky, along with the roaring flames. Then Envy’s chains rattled back into position.

It was over. Over at last. Another part of my vengeance complete.

“Good-bye, Grond.”

Those words came to me unbidden, just like my tears.

“Good-bye... Good-bye.”

I closed my eyes and the tears continued to fall, slowly, but without any sign of stopping.

I felt calm now. Unbelievably composed, as though my temper from just a few moments ago had never been. Yet I didn’t feel at peace. It was hard to explain, but this sort of calmness was something else entirely.

All that remained of Grond and his wealth was muddy water and a cloud of green mist, which steadily rose up into the sky alongside the smoke and ash of the fire.

“At last... At long last, I’ve avenged you. All of you.”

The words I spoke did nothing to express my state of mind.

“Hey, that’s not nice, showing Pride when I’m right here.”

“...Pride?”

“I’m a part of you, remember. Don’t think you can hide it from me that easily.”

Envy’s words resounded in my ears.

...Now I understand. Now it all makes sense.

Those children didn’t want me to avenge them. They didn’t want revenge.

No, even now I'm still putting words in their mouths. I don't *want* them to want revenge. That's no way to live. No way to die.

There's no way for me to know what they wanted. So that means...

"Ah, I get it now. This is just guilt."

As soon as I realized that, spoke it aloud, those feelings spilled over. I put my hand to my face, as if trying to hold them in.

It was like I kept saying. Even if time was rewound, the sins of the first time didn't go away. In the same way, my own mistakes could never be undone.

I was the one who'd killed those kids. My mistake had led to their deaths. Even if it was Grond who pulled the trigger, I had handed him the gun.

I'd condemned them to death. They suffered, and I couldn't help them. I couldn't do one thing right for them.

"Master..."

"Kaito..."

"It's okay... It's okay," I replied. "I've already had plenty of time to regret my actions. I don't have time to be standing around here feeling sorry for myself."

I had to live with this wound that would never heal. Perhaps it would kill me one day.

But today was not that day.

"I have to kill them. Kill them all. Drag them down to the pits of hell. No matter what happens, and no matter who stands in my way."

I swore an oath. I would keep moving forward. If I stopped for even a moment, that would be a betrayal more cowardly and treacherous than giving up entirely.

"...We will be with you every step of the way, Master. We will not give up until we reach our aims, together."

"We can take all the sadness and all the pain away from you."

"Because you're..."

“You’re...”

““The master of our revenge.””

In the approaching girls’ gaze, I saw none of the warmth that lay within their words. It was like they were telling me, *“You can never escape.”*

“Yeah. Thanks, you two.”

I didn’t need things to be sugarcoated. If they were only chains that bound me to my duty, that was fine by me. That was why I thanked them.

“Well then, Envy.”

“Oh no, you’re going to put me to sleep again, aren’t you? I thought you were going to use me and only me from now on!”

“I can’t possibly do that, I’m afraid. The downsides to your effects are too great. I suppose you’re far from the worst of the bunch, though.”

That was one of the side effects to the immense power she granted. All the soul blades whose names began with *“Sword of Sin”* came with difficult triggers and powerful downsides. While Envy was out, my stats were reduced to a mere third of their original values, and for a full ninety-three days after using her, I couldn’t use any other soul blades or skills, and also all forms of supernatural healing were disabled. Her power allowed me to take on any foe so long as they satisfied the conditions, but the toll for it was weighty indeed.

“Plus, there’s the Curse of Saints to contend with. I can’t just use you whenever I like.”

All the Swords of Sin I had access to were powerful in their own right. That was why the Church had sealed away their power the first time around. Shortly after I was betrayed, they unleashed a powerful ritual they had been secretly devising for dealing with the demon lord. If these soul blades had lacked the chains that bound them, that first life would have gone very differently indeed.

“Well, I suppose I’ll be using you again from time to time. I have a feeling there won’t be that many evil dragons this time, though.”

Saying this, I dispelled my soul blade, and Envy’s body began dissolving into wisps of light.

"...I see. I am only a sword, so I do not understand such things. I would be happy if you called on me again, though."

She turned to Minnalis and Shura.

"I want to be used more. So if my master is not in good spirits, then do whatever it takes to make him feel better. It may cause me jealousy, but it is better than losing him forever."

"Huh?"

"Hwa?"

She smiled a little at the two of them.

"Huh? Hey, what are you saying—?"

Envy disappeared before she could answer me. But it mattered not, for soon my question was answered. Without warning, jets of blood gushed out of me, and I collapsed.

"...Ghah?!"

"Master!"

"Kaito?!"

"Grhhh...this pain...don't tell me, she's...ghah!"

The taste of blood quickly filled my mouth and spilled onto the floor.

"Master, here's a potion! Quickly...!"

"Erm, erm, here's an MP potion!"

The two rifled through their pouches for anything they could use to heal me, but I pushed their offerings away with aching arms.

"No...those won't work against this. I'll leave the cleanup...to...urgh..."

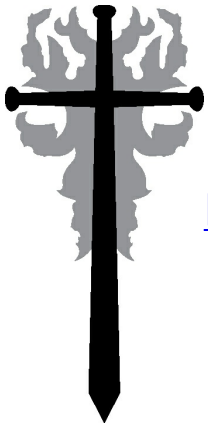
"Master!"

"Kaito!"

Dammit... How could I have foreseen...this...?

That was all I could manage before my body surrendered to gravity, and my

mind was dragged away into darkness.



EPILOGUE

A little out of town, between the forest and the cliff, in the place where Kaito and Nonorick had fought, was a single corpse, its throat torn open, lying in a pool of rapidly congealing blood.

Very soon, however, it would be a corpse no longer. As the light of the moon fell on its wounds, they sizzled as if burning to reseal themselves.

“...Gh! *Cough!*”

They had been dead, true enough, but suddenly sat up sharply, very much filled with life.

“Phew! Pheh, pheh!”

Nonorick spat out the blood from his mouth. As he bathed in the moonlight, his neck and all the other wounds across his body healed over. It was a scene beyond words. In a matter of moments, it was as though he had never been harmed at all.

“Ugh. Huh? That’s weird, did I die?”

He struggled to rearrange the events in his mind. Then all of a sudden, Nonorick remembered what had happened to him and cried out.

“Ah! I lost! I hate it I hate it I hate it! I haaate iiiit!”

Like a child throwing a temper tantrum, Nonorick threw himself back onto the floor and thrashed his arms and legs. If anyone had been there to see the young boy bawling in a pool of his own blood, it would have made for a very strange

sight indeed.

“It’s not fair, it’s not fair! He cheated! He made me lose a life!”

This was Nonorick’s *real* last resort, one that Kaito’s Appraise skill had been unable to warn him about. An intrinsic ability *shared by all true vampires* who had drank the blood of a hundred virgins.

Then, after releasing his anger, Nonorick relaxed and lay flat on the ground.

“Aww, now I have to go and suck the blood of another virgin to make up for it. What a pain.”

That boy looked exactly like a young child, all worn out after throwing a fit. He had none of a child’s innocence, however, and all of a child’s cruelty.

“But that’s okay,” he said. “I took quite a liking to that man. I’m going to make him my plaything, definitely!”

And also, a child’s possessiveness. The pure and single-minded emotion in that boy’s eyes was a fearsome thing indeed.

Nonorick shook his head as though nothing had happened, before rising to his feet and casting a glance over himself.

“But first things first, I have to fix my clothes. I liked these ones, too, and now they’re all torn.”

It was hardly anything to be surprised by, given the desperate battle that preceded, but Nonorick still found it difficult to accept. To him, this was a great calamity. With a flick of his wrist, the tattered clothes returned to normal. He didn’t even hesitate to use up more of his MP than what he had already lost.

“Next, I need to get out of here. Maybe I should visit the Church next.”

On tiptoes, he stretched his arms and began walking into the forest. As soon as he took one step inside, a single garm pounced as if it had been waiting for him.

“Gawr...rgh?!”

A few swift slashes of his sword, faster than the eye could follow, and the forest floor was coated in chunks of wet meat denied even a dying breath,

accompanied by a rain of blood.

“Hmmm...”

Seeing this, the rest of the pack leaped in, eager to avenge their fallen comrade.

“I knew it. This just isn’t enough...”

Though his body was racked with exhaustion, the thrill of battle elevated his spirits above it. He felt his battle-honed instincts pushing him on and on.

“It’s no use, my whole body is burning. My crotch is aching.”

His demeanor was now nothing like a child and could only be likened to a sultry temptress. One after the other, he lured in the monsters of the forest... and slaughtered them. Almost as though they were offering up their lives to feed him.

“Ahh, when will I see you again? I think I’ve fallen in love for the first time in forever! ♪ Wait right there, Kai! Once I get my strength back, I’m coming to take you away!”

His smile, as he stood there in the moon’s rays, was beautiful enough to strike terror into the heart of anyone who saw it.



I was in the royal castle, jewel of the Orollea Kingdom, where I had been invited as an emissary of the Church. After my talks with the princess, I had retired to my room, where I had gone straight to bed after taking out my anger on everything around me.

“Mmm... Ah, thank you, Lady Lunaris. I see now, this is the way things must be.”

After being shown how to proceed, I found myself slowly waking. I opened my eyes to see the rumpled bedsheets I had twisted out of order the night before. Across me was a warm duvet, which my handmaid must have placed there.

“G-good morning, Lady Metelia.”

“Oh, good morning...”

At first, I was surprised to see my handmaid acting so timidly, but soon I remembered. While I had shown my anger many, many times in my previous life, this was the first she was seeing of my short-tempered streak this time around.

Well, not that it bothers me either way...

All I needed was him, and all he needed was me. I didn't need to worry about how other people saw me. We were meant to be together.

Which only made it more vexing that I could not be with him now.

"..."

I fixed my disheveled hair and rose from bed.

"Ah, Lady Metelia, are you headed somewhere?"

"To have a bath," I replied. "I shall need no assistance, so you may stay here."

"W-wait right here, I shall draw you a bath right—"

"That shall not be necessary."

"Wh...what...?"

Leaving the handmaid behind, I walked the silent halls of the castle, until I arrived at the bathroom reserved for royalty and state guests. Naturally, the bathtub had not been filled.

"O water, bringer of warmth, bless me with your offerings. *Water Wave.*"

A stream of hot water flowed from my fingertips and filled the bathtub with a tremendous splash. I was not at all comfortable with having to chant for trifling spells like this, but my MP reserves were nothing like what they were back when I'd trained with Kaito. When I thought about my memories with him, and how it was thanks to his guidance that I could cast magic this well even now, my heart swelled with a fiery passion.

Hot steam quickly filled the chilly room, and after checking with my finger that the water in the bathtub was just right, I removed my clothes and stepped in.

"..."

As the water warmed my body, I let my mind wander. The first thought that came to mind, naturally, was of Kaito.

I should have been Kaito's partner. It was my duty as the priestess. And yet that demon lord had warped him, perverted him, off the true path and into her arms. Because of her, my dear Kaito had gone through so much unnecessary suffering.

I had been weak the first time around. I let things get to the point where death and the hope of another life was the only way to set him free from the bindings of evil.

But not this time.

Now that time has been rewound and Kaito has lost most of his power, things have truly been reset to the way they ought to be.

"Now, where to begin...?"

I could not tarry. I had to make things right this time. I had to correct the hero's path before he strayed too far if I was to ever see the day we would be joined in happiness.

This time, I could make that all happen.

I had no time to lament what had already come to pass. I needed to hurry on to the next location.

"Weep your tears. Let out all your emotion. Only then can you steel yourself for the task ahead."

Just like I taught Kaito all those years ago.

"Look kindly upon me, Lady Lunaris. This time, I shall ensure the proper ending to this tale..."

To the goddess who saw fit to give me a second chance, I offered my words of prayer. Both in gratitude and in newfound determination.

After steeling my resolve once more, I set about learning what I could about what had happened. The first time around, I had been slave to those fools in the Church, until Kaito came and rescued me. This time, however, I seized control preemptively, ridding the country of anyone who would stand in my

way.

Believers in the Lunarian faith were everywhere, becoming my eyes and ears. I had thus heard of the disturbance over in Elmia. I had long suspected he might go after Eumis first; the city's proximity to the capital made her a natural first choice.

So now, after what turned out to be a blindingly short visit to the capital, I was seated in a horse-drawn carriage, headed to the City of Learning itself. There, I intended to pick up Kaito's trail.

"..."

There could no longer be any doubt that Kaito and I had both retained our memories, whilst everyone else had forgotten. That was the only way to explain his actions so far, as well as the message he left behind.

Kaito came into this world with powers granted by heaven. If I still knew that, then of course he did, too. Meanwhile, the *false* princess seemed to have forgotten this.

I wasn't able to figure out what he did after leaving the capital, but I can only assume he doesn't know that I also retained my memories.

If he did, then he would never draw so much attention to himself while his skills and stats were still so low. Even if he was committed to this "vengeance" of his, he would at least take pains to execute it in a more subtle manner.

"I am truly thankful... If Kaito does not know, then that makes my work so much easier."

"What are you talking about, Lady Metelia?"

"Nothing. We are nearing the city of Elmia, so be sure to get some rest before we arrive."

"Really? Ah, I mean, thank you for your consideration, my lady."

My handmaid gave a clear look of surprise. We had been traveling for some hours, and it was now early in the evening. Glancing outside at our armed escort, I could see that they were obviously starting to get fatigued as well.

Excellent. Just as I planned.

If I was to set off on the trail of my beloved Kaito, then my handmaid and escort would only get in my way.

“I am terribly sorry for forcing you all to push yourselves for my sake,” I said, showing a sorrowful look. “But for the sake of the people of Elmia, we must hurry to the site of the undead attacks and see what can be done.”

Cleaning up the residual negative mana left by the undead hordes. That was my pretense for coming to this city. A convincing enough concept for everyone to grasp, while ensuring that my true motivations remained hidden.

“L-Lady Metelia, please raise your head. We are my lady’s humble servants; you do not need to let our health worry you!”

“Thank you. But the fact is that I love you all like my very own children. I cannot allow you to tax yourselves on my behalf.”

Of course, that was all dependent on the condition that, after Kaito and I were joined, these people would continue to give their lives in praise of our merry union.

“It will also be far easier to purify the negative mana during the day. I propose a feast when we arrive in Elmia. While excess is surely a sin, it is also important to keep spirits high, wouldn’t you say?”

With that, I gave an affectionate smile.

In the dead of night, while everyone was fast asleep, I made my way out of Elmia, alone.

“Hee-hee, this way, I see.”

Following the lingering scent of Kaito’s mana, I headed into the forest around the city. It felt almost as though he were beckoning me, and I couldn’t help but smile. The mana had grown weak with time, but my senses could not be fooled, and after a while, I arrived.

“...Oh, my poor darling. Such hate you feel...”

There, nestled among trees, was a wide clearing. This was where Kaito’s mana was strongest, but it was also filled with much pain and bitterness. With all these emotions soaked into the land, this was where my technique would be

useful.

“O lingering spirit, reveal all. Restore the tale written to this fateful place.
History’s Mirror!”

A shroud of light enveloped me, and then before my eyes, like a ripple spreading across water, the mana formed into a glass mirror. Its surface was clouded at first before slowly focusing into an image I could make out.

This magic allowed me to examine the residual mana in a location to work out what had transpired there. And what I saw was...

“Ahh... Kaito, my dear Kaito...”

It was him, looking a little younger than I knew him. I gazed into the image, afraid to even blink lest I miss the sight for but a moment.

“My Kaito...”

I saw him possessed by rage, swinging his sword at Eumis. If only I could have touched him. If only I could have leaped into that mirror and held him in my arms right there. However, all I could do was listen to his sweet voice. Then soon, the magic ended, and all was silent once more.



“Ahh... Why...?”

The last thing I saw was Kaito showing his peaceful smile to two others, a Lagonid girl and a false elf. The people who stood by his side, who weren't me.

“That's where I'm supposed to be...”

Once again, the space around him was obstructed with buzzing flies.

“Why have you gone and picked up more useless followers?”

Why was it not me standing there?

“I must hurry...”

I had to get to them before they contaminated his heart.

“Hyagh?!”

Just then, like a lightning bolt through my body, I felt a tingle of *pleasure*. My mind almost seemed to spring free and rush across the land, guiding me to its source.

“Haaah... Mmm... Ah, Kaito. You used a Sword of Sin...”

My cheeks flushed with warmth, as if a fire were lit beneath me, and I broke into a smile.

Even if time itself were rewound, my bond with Kaito could never be broken.

“So you're over there... I see. Then you must have gone after Grond next.”

Ahh, ahh, ahh.

Wait for me, Kaito.

I'm coming, I'm coming to you right now. Everything will soon be ready. No longer will you have to walk the path of darkness and fear. I'm coming to make it *all go away*.

“Hee-hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee-hee...”

I slowly rose to my feet and continued on.

It's time to move on to the next stage of the plan. To tear Kaito away from those nibbling maggots, and make a place where we can be together forever.

Because that is the way things are meant to be.



“I see no sign of him yet.”

“...I am terribly sorry, Your Highness.”

About a month had passed since Metelia had left the kingdom. Guidott’s report, delivered to me in my chamber, was the same as always: absolutely nothing.

“All we know about him is that he was spotted around when the Wall Eaters damaged the city barriers and allowed a horde of monsters to attack.”

“Indeed. He was seen assisting a young peasant girl at the time. Given how he has behaved thus far, though, it is a difficult tale to believe.”

Peasants though they were, it was supposed to be my duty to protect all humans who lived in these lands. I struggled to comprehend the ways of my foolish mother and father. As long as we ate well, what did it matter if those peasants lived or died? Still, my parents’ foolishness made them that much easier to control, and that allowed me to proceed with my scheme in peace.

I was strengthening my armies in preparation for *war* with the demon lord, but after that, I planned to set my sights on the filthy beastfolk who plagued this world.

Such was the will of the Great Spirit. My indolent parents, who failed to understand that, would soon be met with an early retirement.

“...The monsters are growing bold, and the frequency of elite and powerful variants is rising. Soon you must return to your usual duties, but be sure not to give up the search for that maggot-brained man. I shall proceed with other avenues of investigation.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Guidott bowed, an incongruent gesture for one with his bearing, and left the room. I returned to my thoughts awhile, but with no brilliant ideas forthcoming, I shook my head in defeat.

“*Phew*, this is no good. Perhaps a change of pace will do me good.”

Muttering to myself, I stood up, and headed to my usual place. The Spirit Chamber was a room open only to women of the royal family, where we could pray and commune with the Great Spirit. This land was the birthplace of spirit worship, and there, in that room, was the only place where its voice could be heard.

I walked through the castle's silent halls and arrived at the doorway. It was unadorned, but exuded magnificence nonetheless. It was lavished with intricate engravings and, lacking hinges or any opening mechanism whatsoever, seemed more like a wall carving than a door. However, there was more to it than met the eye.

It actually was a magical barrier that admitted entrance only to those permitted to intrude, and rejected those who were not. To anybody else, it would look and feel just like a normal wall.

“...”

To me, however, it might as well not have been there. I walked right up to that door and *passed straight through it*.

I emerged in a lush garden. Bushes boasted sweet and sour berries, and the flowers were bright and colorful. In the center of the space was a pure white pavilion constructed from marble, and the soft sounds of bubbling fountain water filled the air.

Though the season was turning to winter outside, here it was warm all year round, like it was a different world. I picked a couple of red berries from the bushes I had planted and headed straight for the marble construction.

There was a table there as well, made of the same brilliant ivory-colored stone, and atop it, a perfect porcelain saucer, white as snow. I placed the berries in it and poured myself a cup of tea, which was always at the perfect temperature whenever I arrived, before sitting down in the white birch chair.

“Ahh, the tea here is ever so delicious,” I said, enjoying its fragrant aroma and tossing one of the berries into my mouth. It always soothed my soul to spend a little while here, in perfect harmony, beneath the warm rays of the sun.

Now then, whatever does this all mean?

My mind flitted to the area across my back. There was no longer any trace of the scars that were once there.

“Prepare to lose all you hold dear,” he’d said. I don’t know what’s going on in that man’s head, but assuming he left me alive for a reason, I thought he would be coming back at some point...

“Perhaps it’s time to involve the guild after all, now that the truth is out... No, I mustn’t. The Church may already know but I mustn’t let the empire catch on as well.”

I couldn’t allow the empire to get their hands on the power of the hero. Power that was meant for us to control. They were a barbarous nation that disregarded order and put strength above all else. It wasn’t out of the question that they would join forces with the hero if the situation called for it, and if that happened, it would spell ruin for us.

“Oh dear, and I came here to relax, too...”

I sighed, placed my cup on the table, and walked over to the nearby altar. This was where successive generations of royal princesses offered their prayers to the Great Spirit, and in return, received its wisdom. My elder sister used to pray here every day.

“...Once again, I hear nothing. I suppose I am nowhere near the princess she was.”

With my power, I was only able to hear the Great Spirit’s voice once a month, when the moon was at its fullest. Even then, I usually heard only individual words, broken and incoherent, and nothing like a complete sentence.

Ahh, if only my sister were still alive. If she were here instead of me, she could converse with the Great Spirit just as if she were chatting to a dear old friend. She was so talented she could even glimpse what the Great Spirit looked like. It ought to have been her in my shoes now.

My kind, wise, beloved...

“...I cannot give up. I shall take revenge for my sister, I swear on it.”

I gripped the necklace through my blouse, the only memento of her I now

possessed.

“All these ugly creatures in human skin shall be...”

“Erased? Eradicated? Something like that?”

“Huh?! Who’s there?!”

I spun around at the voice, and immediately launched a deadly fireball before I could even see who it was.

“Ooh, impressive. 🎵 A powerful spell considering you skipped the chant. I guess even a standin like you is still a princess.”

The dust cleared to reveal a figure disguised in thick robes. From his build and tone of voice, he seemed to be a man.

“Only the chosen princesses can enter this holy ground. What manner of creature are you?”

“...Although, if it were your sister I’d expect a light ball to come flying at me, not a fireball. For all the supposed power of this generation, you still can’t quite measure up to the real thing.”

“Grr, you talk too much. How long are you going to insult my family?”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, I’m on your side!” said the man, cackling. Then pulling back his hood, he added. “It’s just because you can’t speak or hear properly that I’ve come to talk in person. In fact, there’s so much going wrong that we don’t really have much choice. If it’s not one thing, it’s another, you know?”

“A...an elf?!”

The man revealed his pointed ears and blond hair. His facial features looked almost fake, like a doll’s.

“What does a bunch of tree-hugging barbarians want with me?”

“There’s really no need to be so prim, Princess. I’ve come a long way to fix your ideas on what is and isn’t human.”

“...”

“Hmm, how can I explain it to you? Oh, how about this?” The elf man

laughed, and his lips turned up into a grin. “Elves are messengers of the Great Spirit—even your sister knew that. With our power, she was able to learn how the world ought to be.”

“Silence, miserable demihuman! It’s scum like you that took my sister away from me! Elves, dwarves, beastfolk, monsters, you’re all the same! A blight on the world that needs to be removed!”

“I’m telling you, elves shouldn’t be on that list. The world is a paradise meant for humans and elves alone.”

“Hah. Such lies. You think I’ll—?”

“What if you heard it from the Great Spirit directly?”

“...What did you say?”

“Even a standin like you could hear the Spirit’s voice as clearly as your sister did if you let us help you. We can help you with your problems, you know. The hero, for example.”

“Rh...”

At my silence, the elf man knew his words had hit the mark, and he smiled an even greater smile.

“So let’s help each other, false princess. We can help you remake this world the way it was always meant to be.”

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